Twenty Reasons to Rethink Your View of Water Baptism

“For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (Romans 10:2).

On January 15, 2014, Gregory Jamie Coots, a “snake handling” pastor, died after being bitten by a rattlesnake which he was handling during a religious service. The 42-year-old Coots resolutely refused antivenin, dying in his home in Middlesboro, Kentucky. Coots had once said: “To me it’s as much of a commandment from God when he said, ‘they shall take up serpents’ as it was when he said ‘thou shall not commit adultery.’”

The snake handling passage to which he was referring is Mark 16:18. The context of that passage is the following:

And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs. Amen. (Mark 16:15-20)

Sadly, Pastor Coots fulfilled that truism: “What you don’t know can kill you.” Pastor Coots did not realize that Jesus’ instructions in Mark 16:15-18, were not directed to us today. They were directed to the Apostles for the inauguration of the Gospel. Jesus’ instructions quoted above, were given only to the eleven Apostles, and accordingly, the accompanying signs
would accompany only the Apostles (with few exceptions) (see Acts 2:43; 3:6-7; 4:30; 5:12, 15; 6:8; 8:13; 9:10-16; 14:3; 20:9-10; 28:1-9; Romans 15:19). Today, there are no more Apostles. (Ephesians 2:20 puts Apostles at the foundation level of Christianity, and every builder knows that once a foundation has been built, it does not continue to be built!) Pastor Coots was expecting the Apostolic signs to accompany HIM, but they didn’t, because he wasn’t an Apostle. Apostolic signs only accompany Apostles, and there are no Apostles today.

And let me add this: the PURPOSE of Apostolic signs is stated in the Bible: to CONFIRM the word of the Apostles.

How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will? (Hebrews 2:3–4, emphasis added)

Today, we have the completed Canon of Scripture, or, as Peter called it, “a more sure word of prophecy” (2 Peter 1:19), which has replaced those signs to confirm, or test (1 John 4:1), the veracity of the words of men. The Apostles’ function in the beginning of the Gospel was rendered obsolete once the Canon of Scripture was complete. Thus, it was no coincidence that when the Canon of Scripture was completed, the last Apostle, John, died.

All this, renders the portion of Mark cited above, passé for us today; “inspired of God and profitable” (2 Timothy 3:16), yes, but passé, nonetheless. The signs of Mark 16:15-20 will not appear today because those were signs which followed APOSTLES, and there are no Apostles today. And there would be
no need for Apostles today, in the first place, because God now uses the completed Canon of Scripture to confirm the truth.

This is much like John the Baptizer. His job was to prepare the way for the Messiah. "He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light" (John 1:8). John’s mission was temporary. He served his purpose and then Jesus took over. So too, Mark 16:15–18 is like John the Baptizer. They had a purpose, they served their purpose, and now new and better things have replaced them. Those instructions were not intended to be carried on indefinitely by all Christians throughout time. Like John the Baptizer, they pointed to something more wonderful, something that WOULD, in fact, be permanent.

Like Pastor Coots, there are many today who use that same portion from Mark, (albeit, not exclusively), to teach that water baptism should still be practiced today. I’m here to say that their practice is just as strange as today’s religious snake handling! Yes, both groups “have a zeal for God,” but both have missed the larger context of the verses which they use to support their respective views.

With that introduction, let me present twenty reasons why one should rethink his/her view of water baptism.

1. While there are commands in the New Testament to baptize OTHERS (e.g., Matthew 28:19), and while there are commands in the New Testament for certain individuals to BE baptized (e.g., Acts 2:38; 22:16), there are NO commands for Christians in general, to SEEK to be water baptized. In other words, Jesus never said, “Love one another as I have loved you, and be baptized as I was baptized.” Paul didn’t write a letter to any church or individual saying, “Don’t get drunk, pray without ceasing, and don’t forsake getting baptized.” I repeat: there are NO imperatives in the New Testament for Christians in
general, or the church, to be water baptized. Should preachers be commanding things which the Bible never commands?

Before going to my second point, I want to say a few things about Matthew 28:19, knowing how heavily Baptists lean on this verse, to support their view of water baptism. The audience of Matthew 28:19 are the eleven Apostles, which are called the “eleven disciples” in verse 16. In verse 18, Jesus reminded them of His authority, for the purpose of saying, (with the connecting word, “therefore,” in the next verse), whatever authority He had, they, too, had. They had authority to make disciples, and they had authority to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Apostolic authority is one thing which Christians, today, do not have. I will come back to this statement in a moment.

We do not have authority to turn people into disciples of Christ; all we can do is be witnesses (Acts 1:8), and pray that GOD would make them disciples. Nor do we have authority to baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (As an aside, if Baptists truly allowed Matthew 28:19 to form their practice of water baptism, they would allow women and children to baptize those whom they turned into disciples, rather than delegating that task to the pastor, who is not mentioned in Matthew 28.)

In verse 20, Jesus told them, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Because of that saying, Baptists and others have interpreted that, according to this line of reasoning: “Since the Apostles to whom Jesus spoke those words, have obviously died, and since the end of the age has not yet come upon us, then, therefore, Jesus must have meant that His authority would extend to us as well.” However, such an interpretation is actually an interpolation. Why must Jesus mean anything other than what He said? He promised to be with
the APOSTLES until the end of the age. Is He not capable of keeping His Word to them? Must their death hinder Jesus from keeping His promise to them? Certainly not. Thus, neither the Text, nor the context, warrants us to extrapolate from Jesus’ words in verse 20, that He was “underhandedly” giving us, today, Apostolic authority. It’s true that Jesus is with us today, but not because we are Apostles, but because He is omnipresent; we have confidence of His abiding presence not because of Matthew 28:19, but because of Hebrews 13:5. When the Apostles passed, Apostolic authority passed with them. What does Apostolic authority look like? We see what it looks like in Matthew 28:19-20, but we also see what it looks like in Matthew 10. (Notice especially the parallels between Matthew 10:1 and Matthew 28:18, and between Matthew 10:7 and Matthew 28:19-20.) In Matthew 10:8, Jesus commanded the Apostles to “raise the dead!” Why is it that Baptists and others use Matthew 28:19-20 as their marching orders, but not Matthew 10:8? Why isn’t Matthew 10:8 (or Luke 10:19, for that matter) called the “Great Commission”? If they answer that there was a change from Matthew 10 to Matthew 28, then I will humbly submit that there was, likewise, a change from Matthew 28 to the time Paul wrote Ephesians 4. (I will return to Ephesians 4 later.)

Moreover, there is nothing in Matthew 28:19, for us to read it this way: “Once you’ve made a disciple, and once you’ve baptized them and taught them, then THEY are to do the same thing; they are to make disciples, baptize them and teach their converts.” In other words, there is nothing there about “perpetual baptisms.” In fact, of all the persons who were water baptized in the New Testament, there is no record of any of them, in turn, water baptizing anyone else. Why? Because that task belonged to the Apostles.
2. John the Baptist himself did not “follow the Lord in believer’s baptism,” as Baptists like to phrase it. After he water baptized Jesus, why didn’t John get water baptized? Surely Jesus would have water baptized him if it were necessary for his Christian walk. John even pleaded with Jesus, but Jesus refused (Matthew 3:14)! Of ALL people, John, it seems, should have been water baptized, lest he be the greatest hypocrite for not practicing what he preached, yet there is no such record of him ever being water baptized.

3. Jesus never commanded water baptism of anyone. In Matthew 28:19, Jesus commanded the Apostles to baptize those whom they made into disciples, but Jesus Himself did not command any individual to be water baptized. He said many things, such as “take up your cross,” “love one another,” “follow Me,” but never, “be water baptized.” Baptists and others call water baptism an “ordinance” of the Lord, (meaning, “something the Lord has ordered”), but, as in the case of John, the Lord never ordered anyone to be water baptized. In Acts 9:6, the risen Lord did not order Saul to be water baptized. In Acts 9:11-12, the Lord did not order Ananias to water baptize Saul. I’m certainly not saying that Saul and Ananias sinned; I’m simply pointing out that, A) water baptism should not be called “an ordinance of the Lord” because He never ordered it, and B) a new convert should not be misled into thinking that he/she is “following the Lord’s example” in water baptism, because there are, frankly, too many disparities to call it such.

4. There were many followers of Christ in the New Testament who were never water baptized. Why were some baptized, while others were not? Because it was not something that every follower of Christ needed to participate in.
5. Nobody in the Bible was ever accused of wrongdoing for having refused to undergo water baptism. Cain “was a murderer” (1 John 3:12); Esau “sold his birthright” (Hebrews 12:16); Lot’s wife “looked back” (Luke 17:32); Judas “betrayed Jesus” (Matthew 27:3-5); Ananias and Sapphira “lied to the Holy Spirit” (Acts 5:1-10); Simon—who was water baptized!—was, notwithstanding, “bound by iniquity” (Acts 8:13-24); Herod “did not give glory to God” (Acts 12:22-23); Demas “loved this present world” (2 Timothy 4:10); Alexander did Paul “much harm” (2 Timothy 4:14); Diotrephes “loved to have the preeminence” (3 John 1:9); but where is the example of “John Doe” going to hell and being remembered for his refusal to be water baptized? I’m not at all suggesting that, unless you can find an example of someone in the Bible committing your particular sin, then you’re on your way to heaven! There are many sins which men can commit, (e.g., cybercrime), which have no example of someone, in the Bible, committing; that fact doesn’t absolve you! Nevertheless, the Bible has many lists of sins which describe the lost, yet none of them contain: “refusing to be water baptized” (see Proverbs 6:16-19; Mark 7:22; Matthew 7:23; 15:19; John 5:29; Romans 1:29-31; 12:9-13; 13:13; 1 Corinthians 5:10-11; 6:9-10; 2 Corinthians 12:20-21; Galatians 5:19-23; 6:7-8; Ephesians 4:31; 5:3-5; Colossians 3:5, 8; 2 Thessalonians 2:12; 1 Timothy 1:9-10; 2 Timothy 3:2-5; Titus 3:3; James 3:13-18; 1 Peter 2:1; 4:3, 15; Revelation 21:8, 27; 22:15).

6. Nearly all of those who were water baptized, were ethnic Jews. (See Matthew 3:5-6, 16; Luke 3:7, 12, 21; 7:29; John 3:23; Acts 2:41; 8:12, 16; 10:48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5; 22:16) This should not be surprising, since the Bible says “John had first preached, before His coming, the baptism of
repentance to all the people of ISRAEL” (Acts 13:24, emphasis added). And John himself said, “it was to make Jesus known to ISRAEL that I came and baptized with water” (John 1:31, emphasis added.) Whatever the reason, if water baptism were expected of all followers of Christ, as is taught by many today, then we should expect to have a record (or statement to the fact) of every follower of Christ--or at least a good sampling of Jews and Gentiles--in the New Testament, getting water baptized. But that is not the record handed down to us. Instead, we read of both Jews and Gentiles following Jesus, but only the JEWISH followers, with a few exceptions, being water baptized. This is self-evident proof of the uniqueness, rather than the universality, of water baptism.

7. In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul declared: “Christ did not send me to baptize.” If water baptism were necessary, and if Paul thought he had to obey Matthew 28:19, then Paul could not have declared that Christ did not send him to baptize.

8. The word “baptism” (or some form of it), which occurs 119 times in the New Testament, occurs only five times AFTER the Book of First Corinthians! Those five passages are: Galatians 3:27; Ephesians 4:5; Colossians 2:12; Hebrews 6:2; and 1 Peter 3:21. The other 114 occurrences all appear between the Books of Matthew, and First Corinthians (mostly in the Book of Acts). And take note that, of those five occurrences listed above, only the Hebrews- and Peter- passages, seem to be referring to WATER baptism; the passages in Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians, as well as the two occurrences in the Book of Romans (6:4, 5), don’t say anything about water. Regarding Romans 6:4-5, Dr. Kenneth Wuest, of the Moody Bible Institute, said:
The mechanical meaning of the word, namely, the introduction of something in a new environment or into union with something else, is in view in Romans 6 and 1 Corinthians 12:13. It is set in a context of supernaturalism. It refers to the act of God placing us in Christ. This precludes any suggestion of water baptism as a means whereby a believing sinner is joined to Christ. It is a question, of course, as to what the inspired writer had in mind when he used the word, and certainly Paul was not thinking of the rite of water baptism, but of the act of God uniting a believing sinner with Christ, thus using the word in its original meaning rather than its ritualistic connotation.

That is to say, in all the Pauline epistles and in the entire Book of Romans, wherever baptism is mentioned, it is SPIRIT baptism which is being mentioned. The Book of Acts is a transitional Book, and so we have a unique vantage point where we can “peer over its shoulder” to witness an overlapping of both the symbol (water baptism) and the substance (Spirit baptism) taking place. The Book of Acts wasn’t written to be a Manual of Church Order; it shows us how the New Testament church “got off the ground” and spread through witnesses. After the Book of Acts, you read of nobody being water baptized or being commanded to be water baptized.

9. This is a key point: Baptism is listed in Ephesians 4:5, among a list of seven unifying elements, in and around which, Christians must “endeavor to maintain unity” (v. 3). Christians are united by one: 1) body, 2) Spirit, 3) hope, 4) Lord, 5) faith, 6) baptism, and 7) God. The baptism in view is not water baptism, but Spirit baptism, which is the Spirit’s act of immersing Believers, at the moment of their conversion, into the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:13). It is vital to note that there are not TWO baptisms, but ONE, just as there are not
two Gods, but one. What about water baptism? By the time Ephesians was written, water baptism was passé, just as was “speaking in tongues.” This is because water baptism was a precursor to Spirit baptism (Matthew 3:11), and like all signs, they are not the reality; signs POINT TO the reality. Water baptism pointed to the reality of Spirit baptism. Once Spirit baptism became a full reality, it fulfilled the sign, rendering the sign passé (Acts 1:5; Hebrews 7:18). If water baptism were still a part of Christianity by the time Paul wrote Ephesians, then he would have said there are TWO baptisms, not just ONE. Those who maintain that water baptism is essential for Christians today, need to see that Ephesians 4:5 teaches there is now only ONE baptism for all Christians, namely, Spirit baptism, which water baptism pointed to while the New Covenant was still in its infancy. To put it bluntly, if you believe in Spirit baptism and yet insist on the necessity of water baptism today, then you must re-write God’s inspired Word in Ephesians 4:5 to say: “TWO baptisms.”

Interestingly, as noted by other commentators, the list of seven essentials in Ephesians 4:5–6, is arranged in a chiastic structure, which is like “frosting on the cake,” in that it underscores the single baptism for Christians as being SPIRIT baptism. Here’s how it works: the first and last items in the list—“body” and “God”—are paired; the second and sixth in the list—“Spirit” and “baptism”—are paired; the third and fifth in the list—“hope” and “faith”—are paired; and finally, the fourth item in the list is the center: the Lord Jesus Christ. This chiasm shows not only the Spirit’s inspiration of the Text, but the fact that the baptism in view is indeed SPIRIT baptism.

There is another interesting linkage between water baptism and Spirit baptism, which a hasty reader might easily miss. In Acts 9:17, Ananias said that Saul would “receive his sight and
be filled with the Holy Spirit.” In the following verse, we read that Saul “received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized.” The type of baptism there, was indeed water baptism. But notice the parallelism between: “receive sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit” (verse 17), and “receive sight and be baptized” (verse 18). Evidently, there is a connection between water baptism and the Holy Spirit. (Compare this with Jesus’ water baptism and subsequent encounter with the Spirit in Matthew 3:16 -- “When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him.”) I believe that connection is that water baptism was the sign of Spirit baptism. (The reason why Paul received both types of baptism--Spirit and water, was because his conversion took place during the transitional stage of the early church.) But Paul eventually penned Ephesians 4:5, officially eliminating the need for water baptism by declaring there is ONLY ONE baptism for Christians now, namely, Spirit baptism. This truth was foretold by John when he said: “I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16).

10. Many of those who were water baptized in the New Testament, did NOT have the Holy Spirit until AFTER they were water baptized. In fact, in these cases, being water baptized was a precondition for receiving the Holy Spirit.

“I indeed baptized you with water, but He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” (Mark 1:8)

Then Peter said to them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the
remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them, who, when they had come down, prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit. For as yet He had fallen upon none of them. They had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. Then they laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:14-17)

When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them... (Acts 19:5-6a)

I need to point out that there is one passage which does not follow that order. In this passage, the reception of the Holy Spirit PRECEDES the act of water baptism:

“Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” (Acts 10:47)

For the sake of completeness, the rest of the passages that show people getting water baptized, do not mention the Spirit at all.

But when they believed Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized. (Acts 8:12)

So he commanded the chariot to stand still. And both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water, and he baptized him. (Acts 8:38)

Immediately there fell from his eyes something like scales, and he received his sight at once; and he arose and was baptized. (Acts 9:18)

And when she and her household were baptized, she begged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faith-
ful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” So she persuaded us. (Acts 16:15)

And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their stripes. And immediately he and all his family were baptized. (Acts 16:33)

Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized. (Acts 18:8)

“And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord.” (Acts 22:16)

To summarize, at times, the Spirit followed water baptism; at one time, water baptism followed the Spirit; and the rest of the time, no mention is made of the Spirit when someone was water baptized. What should we conclude from all this?

Some Bible teachers believe there is significance in the recipients’ religious background as to the timing of when they received the Spirit and when they were water baptized. It is true that in those instances where water baptism PRECEDED the Spirit, the recipients were either Jewish (Mark 1:8; Acts 2:38; 19:5-6) or Samaritan (Acts 8:14-17); and it is true that in the single instance where the Spirit PRECEDED water baptism, the recipients were Gentile (Acts 10:45-48). But the error these Bible teachers make is in ASSUMING that a person’s religious background was the REASON why the Spirit came before, or after, their water baptism. The fact is, the Bible never reveals the reason why the Spirit came before, or after, a person’s water baptism. Nor does the Bible assure us that ALL Gentiles who are water baptized will have already received the Spirit PRIOR to their water baptism, just as it does not assure us that ALL Jews and ALL Samaritans who are water baptized will receive the Spirit AFTER they are water baptized (e.g., Acts 8:9-24). As
shown above, the majority of recorded instances of a water baptism, do not even mention the Holy Spirit!

For the record, there is one thing which all of these examples have in common, and that is that every person who was water baptized believed the Gospel message prior to getting water baptized. Having said that, I should make you aware that certain Bible teachers will tell you that the reason why all the recipients of water baptism believed the Gospel message, is quite obvious: they were all adults, capable of believing! They argue this way: “It’s not that infants were excluded from water baptism; it’s simply that, if an adult wanted to be water baptized, he/she had to first believe. No adult, who was an atheist, would be allowed to be water baptized. As for infants, they would be allowed. After all, you never read of any prohibition of infants getting baptized.” So goes the argument, which has its weaknesses.

Here, then, is my tenth point: When a pastor today tells people of their need to be water baptized, is he able to say with Peter, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”? Is that pastor able to say with Mark, “He who believes and is baptized will be saved” (Mark 16:16a)? If that pastor says, “Acts 2:38 and Mark 16:16 no longer apply today; things have changed; the rule for us today is Acts 10:47 -- (“Can anyone forbid water, that these should not be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”), then I will reply, “Perhaps Acts 10:47 doesn’t apply today, either; perhaps the new rule is Ephesians 4:5: Spirit baptism is sufficient as the only baptism that a Christian needs.”
11. No other normative activity of the Christian life is a mere “one-time-only-and-you’re-done” kind of event. Do you sing one hymn in your Christian pilgrimage and never sing another? Do you pray once in your life, and that’s it? Do you witness one time? Encourage one time? Sacrificially give one time? Read your Bible one time? Attend church one time?

It’s true that the water baptisms in the New Testament were one-time events, but they occurred during the transitional period of the early church, during which time there were many unique, one-time things, such as the presence of the Apostles, the Apostolic gifts, the flaming tongues at Pentecost, and other such things. If you look at the things which comprise the Christian life which are mentioned AFTER that transitional period, you’ll see that they are ALL ongoing practices; not one of them is said to be a single-occurrence type of event.

12. True Christian worship, according to John 4:24, requires “spirit and truth,” not “spirit, truth, and water” (and yet, Roman Catholicism and the “Church of Christ” [Campbellites] teach that water baptism is necessary for salvation). Prior to Spirit baptism being a reality, you would have needed water (John 3:23; Acts 8:36) in order to show forth the sign of Spirit baptism. But now that Spirit baptism is in full operation, you don’t need any water to be a good Christian (just as, today, you don’t need any lambs [for sacrifices] to be a good Christian, since Christ is our Passover).

13. In many churches today, water baptism is said to be the way that a new convert tells the watching world (or, at least those watching) that he/she is a Christian. It’s often called “an outward profession of an inward possession.” But according to the Bible, the way for others to know that you’re a
Christian is by your lips and by your lifestyle (Matthew 5:16; John 13:35), Monday through Saturday, not that you've gotten wet! If water baptism is truly the way to tell others that you're a Christian, then it follows that you should be getting water baptized at least every week!

Additionally, in each case of someone in the New Testament getting water baptized, it never says that they got water baptized in order to be seen by a watching world. In the case of Jesus, His purpose for getting water baptized was “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). The one thing which they all had in common, with the exception of Jesus, is that their reason for getting water baptized was to demonstrate that they had received the message preached to them (Acts 2:41; 8:12, 13), regardless of who was watching. For example, in the case of the Ethiopian Eunuch, there were no witnesses of his water baptism, except for Philip (Acts 8:38). If Philip thought it was important for the Eunuch to show his water baptism to others, he would have told him to invite his family and friends to the baptismal service. Another example is Saul of Tarsus. He, of all persons, it seems, would have wanted his friends and foes to witness his water baptism if it were indeed “the way to tell others that you’re a Christian.” But no mention is made in Acts 9:18 (or Acts 22:16) of any witnesses to his water baptism. (We can assume Ananias performed the water baptism, and therefore, obviously, witnessed it.) And in Acts 9:27, when he needed to “prove himself” to the other disciples, there was no mention of his being water baptized to prove that he was a true Christian. Instead, to prove that he was a true Christian to the disciples, “he declared to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him, and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.”
14. Those who insist that water baptism is necessary for today, miss the nature of a Biblical sign. The specialness of the sign, dissolves in the presence of its antitype. Imagine yourself standing at the foot of a skyscraper, with your back against the wall, admiring its long shadow. Then imagine yourself turning and looking up to see the actual skyscraper. Once you see the actual building, the shadow is “overshadowed” in comparison, and you naturally lose your once-fond interest in the shadow. Similarly, now that Spirit baptism is a blessed reality, why would anyone still feel a need to be water baptized? That would only betray that they do not truly appreciate the fulfillment of the sign. John foretold the day when people would be baptized by Jesus (Matthew 3:11). That was fulfilled when they were baptized with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5; 11:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13). In other words, when a person is Spirit baptized, they have been baptized by Jesus. What could be better than being baptized by Jesus? Certainly not being baptized by any man! And yet, those who have been Spirit baptized, insult such baptism, and show discontentment, by seeking a baptism with water from a mere man.

15. There is a great deal of ignorance today regarding the meaning of the phrase, “in the name of.” In the Bible, the name of someone was that person’s reputation and, at times, their authority. An ambassador who represented another, was said to come “in the name of that person.” This is because the ambassador was representing all that the other person stood for. So, their name was a shorthand way of referring to their being. A person with a good name is a person with a good character and a good reputation; a bad name meant a bad character and a bad reputation. A person can “ruin their name” or “tarnish their
name.” If a person’s name is “made great,” it means that person is made great or famous.

How does this relate to baptism? A person is said to be baptized “in the name of” the one administering the baptism. For example, when John baptized, his “baptizees” were said to have been baptized “into John,” or “in John’s name” (Luke 7:29; Acts 19:3). Likewise, to be baptized “in the name of Paul” meant being baptized by Paul himself (1 Corinthians 1:13, 15). The point is, the only Person who can baptize “in the name of Jesus” is none other than Jesus Himself, (or a duly appointed designee on His behalf, as we see in Matthew 28:19; John 1:25, 33; 4:2; Acts 9:18). Today, many preachers mistakenly presume that they can water baptize someone “in the name of Jesus” by simply reciting the words, “in the name of Jesus,” but they’re missing the point. Only Jesus has the authority to baptize in His name! When a preacher water baptizes someone, whether they realize it or not, and regardless of the preacher’s words, the recipient is being baptized in the preacher’s own name, and in no other name. The Apostles were able to baptize people in Jesus’ name by virtue of their Apostleship. But preachers today are not Apostles, and so they lack the authority that the Apostles had, to baptize someone in Jesus’ name. The only authority that Believers today have to invoke the name of Jesus is in prayers that are made in line with God’s will (John 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23-24, 16). We may pray in Jesus’ name, but we may not raise people from the dead in Jesus’ name, nor cast out demons in Jesus’ name, nor dispel storms in Jesus’ name, nor baptize in Jesus’ name. Why? Because in Matthew 28:18-19, that authority was given to the Apostles, not to Believers of all ages.
Many churches tell new Believers to "follow the Lord in water baptism," but there are many things which the Lord did which were not meant for us to copy, such as walking on water, or dying on a cross to atone for men’s sins. Besides the things which Jesus did, there are many specific commands which Jesus gave, which were not meant for us to literally follow. In Matthew 6:6, Jesus said to go into your room and shut the door when you pray. In Matthew 8:4, Jesus told one follower to show himself to the priest, and offer the gift that Moses commanded. In Matthew 14:16, Jesus told His disciples to feed the 5,000. In Matthew 17:27, Jesus told Peter to go fishing. In Matthew 19:21, Jesus told one man who wanted to follow him to sell all that he had and give it to the poor. In Matthew 21:1-2, Jesus told two disciples to take a man’s donkey and colt. In Matthew 23:3, Jesus told the multitudes and the disciples to observe whatever the scribes and Pharisees tell them to do. In Matthew 26:19, Jesus told His disciples to prepare the Passover. My point is to show that we need to use the utmost caution in how we personally apply our Lord’s deeds and imperatives. Just because Jesus did it, or said it, does not make it normative for all people of all time. It seems arbitrary, therefore, to pick some things which Jesus did, and attempt to copy them, but not others. Moreover, there are things about Jesus’ water baptism which are impossible for us to copy. For example, Jesus was water baptized “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15). Surely Baptists do not tell new converts, “Follow the Lord by getting water baptized and in order to fulfill all righteousness.” The point is, it is a misnomer to tell people to “follow the Lord in water baptism,” when the truth is, we can only simulate, at best, SOME of the details.

Incidentally, nobody in the Bible who was water baptized ever did so supposing that they were “following the Lord’s
example.” Those who were water baptized did so in order to show submission to, and acceptance of, the message they received.

17. The phrase “Believers’ baptism” should not be used to describe water baptism, because true “Believers’ baptism” is that baptism which occurs immediately upon a person’s becoming a Believer, and that, we know, is Spirit baptism. So “Believers’ baptism” is actually Spirit baptism, not water baptism. In fact, the Bible never calls water baptism “Believers’ baptism.” Rather, the Bible calls water baptism “John’s baptism” (Matthew 21:25; Luke 7:29; 20:4; Acts 1:22; 10:37; 18:25; 19:3). Therefore, those who teach new converts to seek WATER baptism, are actually teaching them to seek JOHN’S baptism!

18. The Bible does not teach how water baptism is to be performed. At the very least, this means that nobody should be dogmatic about what they believe to be the only right mode of water baptism. There are convincing arguments supporting sprinkling (Ezekiel 36:25; Hebrews 10:22; 12:24; 1 Peter 1:2), pouring (Acts 2:33; 10:45; Romans 5:5; Titus 3:6), and immersion (Matthew 3:16; Acts 8:38-39; Romans 6:4). There is Scriptural justification for saying, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19), as well as Scriptural justification for simply saying, “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). Scripture does not require that only ordained ministers perform the ceremony. There are many ways that water baptism can take place without violating any Biblical principle. So, churches which require a member to subscribe to a certain view of water baptism, are adding a requirement for church membership which the Bible never requires.
19. Everyone in the New Testament who was water baptized, was water baptized immediately following their conversion (except, of course, for Jesus). The Apostles did not wait six months to a year to ascertain whether or not the candidates exhibited the fruit of regeneration. John expected the fruit of repentance to issue from the people whom he had already baptized. “I indeed baptize you with water UNTO repentance...” (Matthew 3:11a, emphasis added). The candidates did not matriculate through a new members class before getting water baptized. The Ethiopian Eunuch told Philip, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God,” and all Philip said was, “If you believe with all your heart, you may [be water baptized]” (Acts 8:37). In fact, so soon after a person’s profession of faith were they water baptized, that Philip water baptized a man who, shortly afterward, proved that he was never genuinely converted (Acts 8:9-24). Some people say that Philip should have been more careful vetting his candidates, but that, evidently, was not a concern of his. As mentioned in a previous point, some people were water baptized BEFORE they had the Holy Spirit. Evidently, the Apostles did not think that the only valid candidates for water baptism were those who had proven that they had first been Spirit baptized.

Today, if a church wants to practice water baptism, they should at least follow the pattern of the New Testament by water baptizing people as soon as they profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

20. This is the silver bullet. Unless one is prepared to defend the belief that water baptism is absolutely necessary for one’s salvation--that they will go to hell for not obeying the Lord in this matter--then water baptism is, to them, in the final analysis, utterly optional. Those are the only two
options. Water baptism is either absolutely necessary for one’s salvation, or else it’s utterly optional. And if it’s utterly optional, then a person does no wrong should he/she decide to never be water baptized, and a teacher does no wrong should he/she teach others that they don’t ever have to be water baptized.

I am thoroughly acquainted with the Baptist view which tries to take the middle-of-the-road approach, but it is an untenable position. No matter how highly they esteem water baptism (calling it “one of the two ordinances of the Lord”), by coming short of saying that it is required for one’s salvation, they de facto fall into that broad camp of all those (like myself) who believe that water baptism is optional, regardless of the degree of urgency which they attach to this option. Baptists say, “We won’t accept you as a member in our churches if you’re not water baptized, but we recognize that one can be a Christian and not be water baptized.” If a person can be a Christian and not be water baptized, then why, pray tell, make water baptism a prerequisite for church membership? Shouldn’t any Christian be welcomed? (See Romans 14:1 for the answer.) Where is the sin in “opting out” of something which Baptists officially say is not essential to be saved? The Baptist view is truly doublespeak: “You need to be water baptized, but you don’t really need to be. It’s optional for your salvation, but it’s not optional for obedience.” According to 2 Thessalonians 1:8 and 1 Peter 4:17, those who do not “obey the Gospel” are eternally lost! Baptists are in danger of teaching that obedience is not necessary for salvation, when they say that water baptism is a step of obedience. Let me explain.

If obedience is necessary to being saved (as the Bible teaches), then water baptism would be necessary to being saved—if the Baptists are correct in saying that water baptism is a
step of obedience. But if water baptism is not necessary to being saved, as Baptists contend, then that’s saying that obedience is not necessary to being saved! Baptists see a hierarchy in the Divine commands; some need to be obeyed if you want to be saved, while others, like water baptism, are not essential, or are optional. There is one fatal problem with that: you cannot call a Divine command, “optional.” To their credit, Baptists realize this, which is why they have said, “The Great Commission is not an option to be considered, but a command to be obeyed.” Yet, if water baptism is, as Baptists teach, “the first step of obedience as a Christian,” then they ought to be consistent like the “Church of Christ” (Campbellites) and insist that water baptism is indeed necessary for salvation. The attitude of Baptist ministers regarding water baptism does not match their words. The way they compel new converts to seek water baptism, you would think their soul depended on it, but when they teach about it, they say it has no more bearing on your salvation than a wedding ring has on one’s marriage, and that it does nothing more for the recipient than to get him/her wet. If that’s all it does, then why bind people’s consciences over a non-essential issue? This is why the Baptist view of water baptism is a house of cards, a grand heist of men’s liberty, a hoax, a laughingstock, a dog with a loud bark but no bite, having a Biblical veneer but being substantially hollow, and as non-edifying as Doctor Doolittle’s two-headed “Pushmi-pullyu” (push-me-pull-you). It’s what the Apostle James called “a double-minded man” (James 1:8). They need to know that a command that has no enforceable consequences for disobedience, is not a command at all, but simply GOOD ADVICE which one may “take or leave” as he/she pleases, and on which grounds, therefore, no other Christian has the right to judge another, or to forbid them church membership. If water
baptism is ultimately optional, then you have no right to object to the statement: “Christians today need not be water baptized” (the view presented here). THE ONLY PERSON WHO CAN OBJECT TO THAT STATEMENT, IS THE PERSON WHO BELIEVES THAT WATER BAPTISM IS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY FOR ONE’S SALVATION.

In summary, water baptism was a Divinely ordained, temporary sign, whose main purpose was to point forward to the blessed reality of Spirit baptism. Jesus (Acts 1:5), John (Matthew 3:11), and Peter (Acts 11:16) explicitly taught this. Like all other Biblical signs, (e.g., animal sacrifices, circumcision, the Sabbath, the Temple, Passover, etc.), when the reality to which it pointed, fulfilled the sign, the sign became passé, and is to be seen more like a trophy in a glass display case, rather than a ritual to continue to perform. I believe that most of the people who believe that water baptism is for today, do not realize that water baptism was a sign that pointed to, and was fulfilled by, Spirit baptism. No Christian would say that animal sacrifices are for today, and yet, many Christians say that water baptism is for today, not realizing they both are signs which pointed to, and were fulfilled, by a greater reality. We must view Biblical types within the larger context of God’s revelation, rather than looking at them with blinders on, leading us to carry on outmoded rituals well past their expiration date. Just as the saints in the Old Testament did not need to be water baptized, so today, Christians do not need to be water baptized. According to Ephesians 4:5, there is now ONE baptism--not two--for all Believers, and that is Spirit baptism.