Thirteen Reasons Why Water Baptism Is No Longer

“For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge” (Romans 10:1).

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 reads as follows:

Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. 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 16:14–20)

Sadly, Pastor Coots died because of that truism, “What you don’t know can kill you.” What Pastor Coots did not know is that Jesus’ instructions quoted above were given only to the
eleven Apostles, and accordingly, the accompanying signs would accompany only the Apostles (see Acts 3:6-7; 5:15; 20:9-10; 28:1-9). Also, the purpose of the signs is stated: to confirm the word of the Apostles. Today, there are no more Apostles. And 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. 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.

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.

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 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 word “therefore” in the next verse), whatever authority He had, they, too, had. Apostolic authority is one thing which Christians today do not have. I will come back to this statement in a moment. 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, warrant 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 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 (see the sixth point below).

2. Notice that John the Baptizer didn’t “follow the Lord in believer’s baptism,” as Baptists like to put 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 asked Jesus, but Jesus refused! As far as we know, John the Baptizer was never water baptized.

3. There were many followers of Christ in the New Testament who were never water baptized. Why were some baptized, while others were not? Could it be related to the fact that 95 percent of those who were water baptized, were ethnic Jews? (Interestingly, John did say “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 given to us. Instead, we read of people (both Jews and Gentiles) who followed Jesus, and who were not water baptized. This is self-evident proof of the uniqueness, rather than the universality, of water baptism.

4. In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul said that “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 said that Christ did not send him to baptize.

5. 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 supernaturality. 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 ever being commanded to be water baptized.

6. 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 important 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-fledged 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 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.

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.”

7. True Christian worship, according to John 4:24, requires “spirit and truth,” not “spirit, truth, and water” (and

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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).

8. 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 we’re a Christian, then it follows that we 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 of any witnesses to his water baptism. (We can assume Ananias performed the water baptism, and therefore, obviously, witnessed it.) And in verse 27, when he needed to “prove himself” to the other disciples, there was no mention of his being water baptized to demonstrate 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.”

9. 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, 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. That would be like telling your spouse that you’d be happy to have her sit beside you at the dinner table, but you also want a photograph of her on the dinner table for you to glance at during the meal; your wife on your right hand, and a photograph of her on your left! Is her presence that pitiful that it must be supplemented with a photograph?

10. 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 even, 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 reputation; a bad name meant a bad character or 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 baptize “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 name of the preacher, and none other.

11. 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 by fulfilling 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.

Furthermore, 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 1) water baptism should not be called “an ordinance of the Lord” because He never ordered it, and 2) 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.
12. 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.

13. 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 is 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. Actually, 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 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 speak 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, 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. When one rests in, and fully appreciates the finished work of Christ, that person ceases to offer animal sacrifices. Should he continue to offer animal sacrifices, he would be betraying contempt for the finished work of Christ. A similar comparison could be made between water bap-
tism and Spirit baptism. 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. According to Ephesians 4:5, there is now ONE baptism—not two—for all Believers, and that is Spirit baptism.