

CHILD AND YOUTH IMMERSION

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CHILD AND YOUTH IMMERSION¹

It has been wisely said:

“These are my convictions. You can’t have them; for I can not give them to you. Instead, I’ll show you the Scriptures, evidences, and reasons for my convictions. Then you can build your own.”²

Discerning the appropriate age and/or maturity level necessary for young people to be immersed into Christ is an issue that has faced the Church for ages. The New Testament (NT) does not give any examples of children being immersed, nor does it any mandate any specific age for immersion. As David Chadwell correctly observes: “There is an additional factor that makes this matter even more confusing. The book of Acts deals only with the conversion of first generation Christians all of whom were adults. Most of the Epistles are written to first generation Christians. The New Testament contains no information about the conversion of the children of those first Christians.”³

Rather than a stated age, the NT Scriptures give us adequate information and principles to arrive at Godly decisions regarding the immersion of young individuals. In this way the NT operates much differently than the old law that was chiseled into stone. II Peter 1:3 states: “...His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him...” This being the Truth, certainly His Word is adequate to guide in these matters regarding salvation on an individual basis. As the old Restorationists would say: “The

¹ “YOUTH” - for the purposes of this paper, the term youth will refer to individuals aged thirteen to nineteen years old. The term is used in Genesis 37:2 - Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers while he was still a youth...”

IMMERSION - for the purposes of this paper the term immersion will be used when quoting bible verses verbatim that use the term “baptism”. “Baptism is a transliteration from the Greek word baptizo, and has been allowed to be defined as “to sprinkle, pour, or dip” in the English. The true definition of the Greek word baptizo is to dip, plunge, or immerse according to all honest Greek scholars.

²Quote from Jay Wilson during personal bible studies; circa 1977, MSU campus, Bozeman, MT.

³David Chadwell, web site: <http://www.westarkchurchofchrist.org/chadwell/1998/110198pm.htm> dates: October 11th, 15th and November 1st, 1998 p.m. messages

Bible only makes Christians only.”⁴

More often than not, it is not the lack of scriptural information or clarity that causes confusion regarding this issue, but the emotional nature of the subject. A person’s own salvation, or that of his young children, may become questionable. Herein lies the wisdom of the successful truth seeker - those who have ears to hear - to dismiss one’s own feelings and position in approaching the Scripture.

I pray this study will be a useful tool for those seeking God’s Truth regarding the immersion of young people into Christ. As the Lord has said: “Come now, let us **reason** together...” (Isaiah 1:18).

Jesus’ Immersion

Anyone who is even remotely involved with New Testament Christianity, understands that following Jesus’ example is the whole idea. The Apostle Paul, in making this point, declares: “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ” (I Corinthians 11:1). Peter instructed his disciples in various regions to follow Christ’s example: “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps...”(I Peter 2:21). Jesus Himself made the command: “ Follow Me, and I will make you become fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19). These passages exemplify the many texts which direct the seeker of truth to do as Jesus did.

But what does it mean to follow Jesus specifically in regard to His age at immersion? According to Luke 3:23, Jesus was approximately thirty years old when He was immersed by John. Certainly no one would require an individual to wait until the age of thirty to be immersed.

Interestingly, the Scripture does not give us an account of Jesus’ life between the age of twelve and thirty - the very span in which most people are immersed into Christ today. By looking carefully at the events occurring immediately after His immersion, as recorded in Matthew 4: 1-11, it becomes evident that Jesus was preparing himself during those earlier years. Obviously He practiced the discipline of fasting before His immersion- to the point where he could fast in the wilderness for forty days straight. His study and memorization of the Word is also evident, as He defeated the devil with verbatim Scripture during His temptation in the wilderness. The description of Jesus’ immersion in Luke 3:21-22 also indicates prayer to His Father in heaven was an established discipline.

Jesus’ immersion serves as an example in at least two ways, with regard to the child/youth immersion issue. First, Jesus was most certainly an adult at the time of His immersion. Secondly, He used the time prior to His immersion to prepare Himself; forming disciplined spiritual habits as a foundation for ministry following immersion.

⁴A commonly used slogan of the American Restoration Movement starting in the early 1800’s. Possibly coined by Thomas Campbell, circa 1810.

New Testament Conversion Accounts

The New Testament book entitled The Acts of the Apostles [Acts] gives a historical account of Christ's Church as it began in the first century. The inspired author Luke documents many conversion accounts in this book, involving both Jews and Gentiles, in various settings and circumstances. These accounts give us a clear picture of the New Covenant's plan of salvation in Jesus Christ and reveal those who are acceptable candidates for immersion into Christ.

Adult Men

In the first two conversion accounts, the gospel is preached by Peter to those who obeyed the terms of salvation: "Repent and let each of you be immersed in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). In both cases those immersed are cited as being men. In Acts two the audience is described as being "devout **men**, from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5) who were assembled in the temple at Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. Later in Acts chapter three Peter preaches again and as a result "many of those who had heard the message believed; and the number of the **men** came to be about five thousand" (Acts 4:4).

In both of the above Scripture references the Greek word for "men" is ANER. This term is translated "man/men" sixty-nine times and "husband"/husbands" fifty-two times in the New American Standard Bible [NASB].⁵ Note that the translation to the English word "husband" or "man" (depending on the context), implies a male individual, mature enough to marry. I Corinthians 13:11 reads: "When I was a child I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man [ANER], I did away with childish things." In the words of W.E. Vine, the Greek word ANER is used in this passage "as distinct from a boy or infant."⁶ Without a doubt then, the first two conversion accounts recorded in Acts show adult males to be viable candidates for immersion.

Adult Women

The historical account of Acts goes on specifically to record accounts of women being immersed into Christ. Acts 5:14 states that "multitudes of men and **women**, were constantly added to *their number* [the Church]" as a result of the apostles' early ministry in Jerusalem. As the gospel message spread into Samaria, Acts 8:12 states: "But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being immersed, men and **women** alike". Much later in Acts, Paul shares the gospel with a group

⁵Robert Thomas, "Hebrew-Aramaic and Greek Dictionaries," New American Standard Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, pg. 1632.

⁶W.E. Vine, An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words, Vol. III., pg. 34.

of ladies assembled for prayer, and Lydia of Thyatira is immersed (Acts 16: 13-15).

The Greek term GUNE, translated as “women” in the passages above, refers to adult females in its usage. The NASB translates GUNE as “woman”/ “women” one hundred and twenty-eight times, and also as “wife”/ “wives” eighty-three times.⁷ Here, as with the “men” [ANER], the term’s interchangeability with individuals mature enough to marry denotes adulthood. In two Scripture passages women [GUNE], and also men [ANER], are distinguished from the children present. These passages read as follows: “There were about five thousand men who ate, aside from women and children” (Matthew 14:21), and “Those who ate were four thousand men, besides women and children” (Matthew 15:38). Without a doubt, the Scriptures specify both **adult** men and women as acceptable candidates for immersion.

Households

In the course of events described later in Acts, on three occasions whole households were immersed into Christ. The first case involved a Gentile named Cornelius who is described as “one who feared God with all his household” (Acts 10:2). When Peter came to proclaim the message of salvation, Cornelius “had called together his relatives and close friends” (Acts 10:24). Peter found “many people assembled” (Acts 10:27) and after preaching to those assembled “he ordered **them** to be immersed in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:48). In this case, not only Cornelius, but also his whole household and some friends heard the gospel and were immersed.

In Acts chapter 16, two households are immersed into Christ by Paul and his companions. Lydia, a woman from Thyatira, and her household were immersed according to Acts 16:15. Later in the chapter the Philippian jailer asks the question of Paul and Silas; “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30). According to the Scripture, “they spoke the word of the Lord to him together with all who were in his house. And he took them that very hour of the night and washed their wounds, and immediately he was immersed, he and **all his household**” (Acts 16:32-33).

In the historical account of Acts, children are never individually or specifically recorded as being immersed. Many religious groups and individuals use the references cited above, regarding entire households being immersed, to legitimize the practice of immersing (baptizing) children and infants. It is true that the “households” of that time often had several generations living together in a single dwelling, along with servants and their families. However in these cases cited in Acts, the Scripture does not state whether or not children were living in these particular households, or if any children were among those immersed. Many have and will continue to argue this point; in which case the proverb rings true: “Through presumption comes nothing but strife” (Proverbs 13:10). But to hang one’s eternal salvation on the possibility that children were included in these immersions is tenuous - at best.

⁷Thomas, *op. cit.*, pg.1640.

Enemies

It has been said that a person's enemies will often communicate things that his friends will not, since an enemy will not be favorably biased towards his foe and often scrutinizes the opposition with great diligence. This was true especially of the rulers who, after they crucified Jesus, went to Pilate and said: "Sir, we remember that when He was still alive that deceiver said, 'After three days I *am* to rise again.' Therefore, give orders for the grave to be made secure until the third day, lest the disciples come and steal Him away and say to the people, 'He has risen from the dead,' and the last deception will be worse than the first." (Matthew 27:63-64). While Jesus' disciples had forgotten and/or dismissed His claims of resurrection after three days in the grave, Christ's enemies not only remembered His statements but were acting upon them.

In the same way, the enemies of the Lord's Church in Acts give clear testimony as to who was included in its membership. When the persecution of the Church started after the stoning of Stephen, "Saul began ravaging the Church, entering house after house, and dragging off **men and women**, he would put them in prison" (Acts 8:3). Men and women were targeted as members of the Church, not their children, by their adversary Saul. After ravaging the Church in Jerusalem, Saul then set out to do the same at Damascus. Acts 9: 1-2 reads: "Now Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters from him to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, both **men and women**, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." Later Saul was converted to Christ and became the great Apostle Paul. Testifying of his persecution of Christians in Acts 22, Paul stated: "And I persecuted this Way to the death, binding and putting both **men and women** into prisons" (Acts 22:4).

In these three Scripture passages, the Greek words translated "men" [ANER] and "women" [GUNE] are the same words described earlier in this section and necessarily refer to adults. Note that the Scripture repeats itself three times; specifying that the Lord's enemies persecuted adult men and women, not children, while trying to destroy the Church.

The Scriptural Status of Children

Jesus' words in Matthew 18: 1-10 and Matthew 19: 13-15 clearly define the status of children in relation to the kingdom of heaven. These texts and related Scriptures prove that children live in a state of salvation before God, as well as exemplifying the condition of humility that adults must regain in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. It should be noted that the phrases "kingdom of heaven," "kingdom of God," and "the kingdom of His beloved Son" all refer to Christ's Church.⁸

⁸Jay Wilson, Christ's Church - The Church described in the New Testament, pg. 25:

"Throughout the New Testament, the kingdom is designated by different names. A comparison of Mark 4:11 and Matthew 13:11 will show that the kingdom of God is the same as the kingdom of heaven. And a comparison of Mark 9:1 with Matthew 16:28 will make it plain that the kingdom of God is the same as Jesus' kingdom."

In Matthew 18, when Jesus was asked “Who then is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” He called a child and set the child before them (v.1&2). Jesus goes on to identify Himself with the children (v.5), and then warns those who would be stumbling blocks to the children (v. 6-9). Note, if children can be caused “to stumble” this denotes an original state of uprightness. These verses all strongly imply that children are in good standing with the Lord.

Then Jesus made the statement to the disciples “Unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven”(v.3). Next, He clarifies the characteristic which children have that adults must gain, or be “converted” to, in order to enter the kingdom: humility. Jesus states it this way: “Whoever then **humbles** himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (v.4).

Adults must humble themselves and are commanded to do so. Children on the other hand exist in a humble state necessarily; they are dependent on their parents for the necessities of life (food, shelter, clothing), and are subject to their training and direction as well as that of other adult authorities. Jesus exemplified this characteristic before His Father when “He humbled Himself, by becoming obedient to the point of death” (Philippians 2:8). In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus cried out to His Father: “Not my will, but Thine be done” (Luke 22:42). In various NT texts Christians are called upon to “die daily ,” “take up his cross daily,” and “clothe yourselves with humility” in order to be subject to their Heavenly Father.⁹ This process of conversion and becoming like children (having true humility) begins for adults at immersion, according to such Scriptures as Romans 6:3-4.

Matthew 18:10 goes on to conclusively prove that children are in a state of salvation before God. Jesus states that “their [the children’s] angels in heaven continually behold the face of My Father.” The word “their” indicates possession; in this case each child has one or more angels “belonging to” him, with the idea of being “assigned to” him. That being the case, Hebrews 1:14 defines the function of the angels: “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those **who will inherit salvation**?” Note that angels render service for a select portion of humanity: those “who will inherit salvation.” In the case of Matthew 18:10, it is the children. Therefore children are numbered with those who will inherit salvation.

Jesus then follows up with a statement later in Matthew 19:14 - “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven **belongs** to such as these.” Here in simple, direct terms the Lord declares to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs. The kingdom belongs to the children, and also those adults who “humble themselves” as obedient children of their heavenly Father.

These Scriptures prove children are numbered with those who are in the kingdom of heaven and will inherit salvation. Therefore, children are not in need of regeneration through immersion for the forgiveness of sin and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38).

⁹Scripture References: “die daily” - I Corinthians 15:31, “take up cross daily” - Luke 9:23, “clothed with humility” - I Peter 5:5.

Scriptural Ages for Children

Once it is concluded that children have salvation under the terms of Jesus' covenant without being immersed, the next logical step is to establish parameters for those whom the Bible considers to be "children". The Greek word for "children" used in the previous texts (Matthew 18:1-10 and 19:13-15) is "PAIDION" and is designated #3813 by Strong's Greek numbering system.¹⁰ For the purposes of this paper, first an overview of the NT usage of this word will be considered, then specific texts which associate the word with various age levels will be examined.

PAIDION is used 52 times in the Greek NT Scriptures. It is translated into English as "child" twenty-one times, "children" seventeen times, "Child" ten times, "boys" once, "child's" once, and "children's" once.¹¹ For the purposes of this study, the Word of God cleaves very nicely with regards to PAIDION. Forty-eight times the word PAIDION is used in reference to children of a young physical age. The other four times when PAIDION is used, it carries a more general meaning; denoting God's children, which would include brethren of any physical age.¹²

The Gospel accounts of Mark and Luke, which are indicative of NT doctrine, offer three texts which yield ages for PAIDION. The first text using PAIDION with a defined age is Mark 5:35-43. In this case Jarius' daughter is referred to as "the child" [PAIDION] in verses 39 and 41. Verse 40 also uses PAIDION in the phrase "the child's father". Then verse 42 gives the child's age as 12 years old: "And immediately the girl rose and began to walk; for she was twelve years old."

The second text, Luke 2: 21-40, indicates an age of 40 days after birth for PAIDION. Here the Christ child is brought up to Jerusalem and presented to the Lord "when the days for their purification according to the law of Moses were completed" (v. 22). In verse 27 the word PAIDION is used in reference to Jesus as he was brought into the temple: "when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law." According to Bible

¹⁰Thomas, *op. cit.*, pg. 1672.

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²Vine, *op. cit.*, pg. 188: The four times that PADION is used in the non-literal sense, Vine makes specific comment: "It is used metaphorically of a) believers who are deficient in spiritual understanding, I Cor. 14:20, b) and in affectionate and familiar address by the Lord to His disciples, almost like the English, 'lads,' John 21:15, c) By apostles John to the youngest believers in the family of God, I John 2: 13, 18; There it is to be distinguished from "TEKNIA," which term he uses in addressing all his readers (v.v. 1, 12, 28)." TEKNIA is the more general term translated to the English "child." It means "to beget" or "to bear" in the sense of offspring, giving the prominence to birth. As used in its literal sense there are no age associations to the term in Scripture.

historians such as Ralph Gower, 40 days after birth is when the child would have been brought up to the city of Jerusalem to offer the necessary sacrifices.

An age associated with PAIDION is also found in Luke 1:59. The Scripture reads: “And it came about that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child [PAIDION] ...” In addition, it should be noted, that both Luke 2:17 and John 16:21 use PAIDION with reference to infancy and birth in their contexts.

These biblical references will specifically and directly give physical age parameters for the word PAIDION (as used in its literal sense), denoting children of a young physical age - 8 days, 40 days, and 12 years old. Interestingly, age 12 may not be the upper limit for PAIDION, as the transition statements in Luke 2:40 and 2:52 are open-ended and give no information as to when Jesus grew out of childhood.

The only other NT text yielding an age for a young person is Luke 2: 42-51. In this text Jesus is 12 years old (v. 42) and is described as “the boy Jesus” in verse 43. The Greek word for boy is “PAIS” (Strong’s #3816) and is closely associated with PAIDION (Strong’s #3813): PAIS being a primary root word, and PAIDION being a diminutive of it.¹³

If the Scripture is used to define its own terms, there can be no doubt that individuals twelve years of age and younger do not need to be immersed. When Jesus used the term PAIDION to describe the state of children relative to His Father and the Kingdom of heaven, He understood the Scriptural age parameters associated with this word. Therefore, to immerse children [PAIDION] is not consistent with the Word of Christ, and constitutes a departure from the NT pattern for His Church.

The Old Testament Example

The physical nation of Israel, under the Law of Moses, provides much spiritual insight for the Church today, as well as direction for individual Christians. This is certainly the case when studying the issue of child and youth immersion into Christ. When taken in the proper spirit, the Old Testament (OT) Scriptures are of great value in revealing the mind and disposition of God with regard to this matter.

But great care must be taken when making application of OT examples to NT Christianity. There is great danger in the Law, as “the letter kills” (II Cor. 3:6). For this reason much NT Scripture is devoted to defining the OT Law’s appropriate role now that the NT is in effect. The old King James version’s wording of II Timothy 2:15 is particularly appropriate in this regard: “Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, **rightly dividing** the word of truth.”

Hebrews 10:1 states that the Law “has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the

¹³Ibid.

very form of things.” The Law, then, is like a shadow - it has the basic outline, but the details and substance are lacking. The substance, “the good things to come,” belongs to Christ and His “perfect law, the law of liberty” (James 1:25). For these reasons, the examples and precedents set by the OT must be handled very carefully by the NT Christian in ascertaining God’s application and meaning for today.

David Fagan, in a statement entitled “Understanding Typology,” makes the following observation with respect to the inter-relationship of the Old and New Testaments:

The Bible contains many types, Hebrews 8: 4-5. A type is a copy, a shadow, or a model, of another reality. For example, Melchizedek (Hebrews 7) is a type of Christ. He had some of the characteristics of the Messiah and we learn important lessons from the similarities between the two.

The waters of the flood are a *type* of baptism that *now saves us*, 1 Peter 3:20-21. Just as Noah and his family were saved from the destruction of un-godly men and the earth by the waters of the flood, so we are saved by the waters of baptism. Types explain many details about Bible subjects.

If a solid object is held up to a strong light it will cast a shadow on the wall. While the shadow has strong similarities to its source, it is just a shadow and not the substantive reality, but only a copy. This is clearly illustrated in the shortcomings of the Old Testament law, Hebrews 10:1.¹⁴

The Age of Twenty

With the above precautionary statements in mind, the OT Law as given through Moses marked the age of twenty as the beginning of adulthood. The age of twenty was the determining factor for various roles and responsibilities within God’s nation of Israel. And very significantly, this age denoted the condition of the individual’s heart and the need for salvation.

Soldier

After leading His people out of slavery in Egypt, God directed Moses to take a census. The command of the Lord reads: “*Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, by their families, by their father’s households, according to the number of names, every male, head by head from twenty years old and upward, whoever is able to go to war in Israel, you and Aaron shall number them by their armies*” (Numbers 1: 2-3). The primary purpose of this census was to number the capable fighting men in Israel. Therefore, to be a soldier in God’s army at that time, a man had to be at least twenty years old.

The Priesthood

The tribe of Levi, however, was not numbered for this census, as they were exempt from military service. Instead, the Levites were set apart to care for and administer the tabernacle of God. The details are recounted in Numbers 1: 48-53, as follows: “*For the LORD had spoken to Moses, saying, ‘Only the tribe of Levi you shall not number, nor shall you take their census*

¹⁴David Fagan, The Tabernacle of God and the Christian, pg. 3.

among the sons of Israel. But you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings and over all that belongs to it. They shall carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings and they shall take care of it; they shall also camp around the tabernacle. So when the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle encamps, the Levites shall set it up. But the layman who comes near shall be put to death. And the sons of Israel shall camp, each man by his own camp, and each man by his own standard, according to their armies. But the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the testimony, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the sons of Israel. So the Levites shall keep charge of the tabernacle of the testimony.” At this point, no age restrictions were attached to the Levites in the work associated with the tabernacle.

Later, age requirements were imposed on the tribe of Levi with respect to their priestly duties. According to I Chronicles 23:24, only those Levites twenty years old and upward were allowed to do “the work for the service of the house of the Lord.” The Word of God goes on to describe these duties: *“For their office is to assist the sons of Aaron with the service of the house of the LORD, in the courts and in the chambers and in the purifying of all holy things, even the work of the service of the house of God, and with the showbread, and the fine flour for a grain offering, and unleavened wafers, or what is baked in the pan, or what is well-mixed, and all measures of volume and size. And they are to stand every morning to thank and to praise the LORD, and likewise at evening, and to offer all burnt offerings to the LORD, on the sabbaths, the new moons and the fixed festivals in the number set by the ordinance concerning them, continually before the LORD. Thus they are to keep charge of the tent of meeting, and charge of the holy place, and charge of the sons of Aaron their relatives, for the service of the house of the LORD”* (I Chronicles 23: 28-32).

In considering why God did not impose an age criteria on the Levites’ duties in the book of Numbers, and later does so in I Chronicles, the context of each passage becomes very significant. In Numbers, God was organizing His people under the command of Moses to enter the promised land. The tabernacle and all its related items were to be carried, set up, and packed up again as they journeyed. This task required much manual labor. By the time I Chronicles takes place the nation of Israel had secured the land God had promised them and the tabernacle was permanently located at Jerusalem. I Chronicles 23: 25-26 points out: *“The Lord God of Israel has given rest to His people, and He dwells in Jerusalem forever. And also, the Levites will no longer need to carry the tabernacle and all its utensils for its service.”* As the need for manual labor became minimal and the spiritual service of the tabernacle remained as the sole duty of the Levites, an age limit of twenty years old and older was imposed for those serving the tabernacle. Of course this has important implications for the NT Church, as each Christian is a priest involved in spiritual service.¹⁵

Atonement Money

Another very significant aspect of the census God had Moses take after being freed from slavery in Egypt, regards the requirement of “atonement money.” The Lord, speaking to Moses

¹⁵Scripture References: I Peter 2:5, 9 and Revelation 1:5-6. Also see section entitled “The Priesthood Factor”.

prior to the taking of the census, states: *“When you take a census of the sons of Israel to number them, then each one of them shall give a ransom for himself to the LORD, when you number them, that there may be no plague among them when you number them. This is what everyone who is numbered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as a contribution to the LORD. Everyone who is numbered, from twenty years old and over, shall give the contribution to the LORD. The rich shall not pay more, and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to the LORD to make atonement for yourselves. And you shall take the atonement money from the sons of Israel, and give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the sons of Israel before the LORD, to make atonement for yourselves”* (Exodus 30: 12-16). It is clear in this passage that “everyone who is numbered, from twenty years old and over” (v. 14) was required to pay the half a shekel atonement money as a ransom for himself. Through the means of this contribution the other eleven tribes participated with the Levites in the tabernacle service, and so secured for themselves the benefits of those religious rites.

The concepts of giving a ransom and making atonement are central to the gospel of Jesus Christ; and the fore-shadow of Exodus 30:12-16 is enormously significant. The Scriptures make it clear that under the NT an individual is ransomed or “redeemed” with the blood of Christ, not silver shekels! I Peter 1:18-19 specifically states: “you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ.”

The concept of atonement means “to cover over, make propitiation; forgive.”¹⁶ Numerous NT passages point to Jesus Christ as the perfect atonement for all time; including Romans 3:25, Ephesians 1:7, Hebrews 2:17, and I John 2:2. Simply put, atonement provides salvation. Under Moses and the Law, the sons of Israel gained their atonement through the half shekel contribution to the Lord for the service of the tent of meeting. Today, under the New Testament, a person is immersed into Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of his sins in order to gain the completely fulfilled atonement. The question then becomes; “If those under twenty were not required to pay the atonement money under the Law of Moses, would a person under twenty need to be immersed into Christ today?”

Knowledge of Good and Evil

An indication of the spiritual condition of those individuals 19 and under at the time of Moses’ census is given in Deuteronomy 1:39. In reproving the sons of Israel immediately before they went into the promised land of Canaan, Moses quotes God as saying: *“Moreover, your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your sons, who this day have no knowledge of good or evil, shall enter there, and I will give it to them, and they shall possess it”* (Deut. 1:39). This quote restates a portion of God’s declaration to His people forty years earlier at Kadesh Barnea. At that time the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: *“Say to them, ‘As I live,’ says the Lord, ‘just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will surely do to you; your corpses shall fall in this wilderness, even all your numbered men, according to your complete number from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against Me”* (Numbers 14:28-29). God’s

¹⁶Thomas, *op. cit.*, pg. 1538.

message then continues, stating that: “*Your children however, whom you said would become a prey - I will bring them in, and they shall know the land which you have rejected*” (Numbers 14:31). Note in these texts that the children who would enter in to the Promised Land included all those who were nineteen years of age and under at Kadesh Barnea.

In describing these individuals that would enter into the land of promise, God’s statement recorded in Deuteronomy reveals the condition of their hearts; that they “have no knowledge of good or evil” (Deut 1:39). Logically then, a fusion of these two accounts would yield God’s judgement,¹⁷ at least in the case of the sons of Israel at Kadesh Barnea; that individuals nineteen and under “have no knowledge of good or evil.” This conclusion may be hard to accept for individuals living in today’s culture, where children and youth are often viewed as “little adults” (See Appendix II). But God instructs the disciple of His Word to: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). In this text, to “trust in the Lord” refers to relying on God’s Word as absolute truth (true reality) rather than basing one’s understanding on any given cultural perspective or bias.

This description of having “no knowledge of good or evil” is comparable to the state of Adam and Eve prior to the fall. Before they ate from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:9,15-17), Adam and Eve “were both naked and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25). Once they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil “then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew they were naked” (Genesis 3:7). In God’s presence, Adam states; “I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid myself” (Genesis 3:10). Until Adam and Eve had the knowledge of good and evil, their fellowship with God was intact. They had no need for atonement, (which means to be “covered”).¹⁸ Today, under the terms of the NT, an individual in need of atonement is immersed into Christ and is thereby “clothed with Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

So, how does the example of the sons of Israel under Moses, and especially God’s statement in Deut. 1:39, apply to young people under twenty years old today? Certainly the “little ones” at Sinai and Kadesh Barnea, who were too young to understand God’s commands and the oratory of Moses, were innocent and not accountable. The teenagers of that day may have heard the Word of God through Moses, but did not have written copies at their disposal to study in depth. And even today, with the completed Word of God readily available, at what point can a young person actually discern between good and evil as distinct from knowing right from wrong?

The question of differentiating between the knowledge of good and evil, and merely knowing right from wrong, goes significantly deep. For our purposes here, it must be noted that infants and very small children can be trained to rules of behavior. In this sense even an animal, such as a pet dog, can be trained to know “right and wrong.” But good and evil concerns not only action, but conscious motive of a moral nature. John 8:1-11 provides an excellent example of the difference between right / wrong and good / evil. In this passage the Jewish leaders accusing the

¹⁷For the explanation of hermeneutics concerning the fusion of two or more Scripture references, see: Jay Wilson, God’s Plan of Salvation, pg. 10-12.

¹⁸Thomas, loc. cit.

adulterous woman were indeed right according to the Law, but at the same time were evil in their motives: “testing Him [Jesus], so that they might have grounds for accusing Him” (v.6). On the other hand, Christ could be considered wrong according to the Law for not condemning the adulterous woman. But Jesus was certainly good in saving her life, then using this as leverage and motivation in commanding her to “Go. From now on sin no more” (John 8:11).

Therefore, the overall example of the OT gives twenty years of age as the dividing line for adulthood in several important respects. Only those males twenty years old and upward could serve as either a soldier or a ministering priest under the Mosaic Law. Atonement money, as a ransom before God, was required of all those twenty years old and upward. Finally the heart condition, that of knowing good and evil, is pinpointed to individuals twenty years and over. No other age designation in the entire Bible is used so broadly and decisively in dividing out an individual’s condition and responsibility before God.

A Call to Wisdom

But it must be consistently maintained that these OT passages only serve as examples for the NT disciple: “it [the Law] has only a shadow of the good things to come and **not** the very form of things” (Heb. 10:1). The twenty year-old division of the OT is merely a shadow, not the very form for today. To apply twenty years of age as a verbatim, absolute standard for immersion into Christ does not do justice to the NT design. Again, II Corinthians 3:6 emphatically states: “the letter kills” (the “letter,” in its context, refers to the Law of Moses). Those who have a tendency to be dogmatic or legalistic, and are looking for a static set of rules to lay down, must take heed. Jesus once made a statement to the Pharisees of old, that may apply: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others” (Matthew 23:23).

Instead, the example of twenty years of age from the nation of Israel should be used by the NT Church as a very clear and definite reference point; as a ballpark figure, or as a guide post - not as a dividing line. Some individuals may be mature enough to shoulder the commitment of NT Christianity in their late teens, while others may not be ready until well into their twenties. These matters, to be sure, demand wisdom. The Christian parent or Church leader who has only a casual knowledge, or love, for either the Word of God or the young person in his charge, will most probably miss the mark.

A Scriptural Range for Youth Immersion

The transition period between childhood and becoming an adult, often known as the teen years, is the most controversial with regards to scriptural immersion under the New Testament. The NT contains no specific examples of anyone between thirteen and nineteen being immersed into Christ, nor is there any prohibition to do so. This makes the matter very subjective. As the experienced student of the Word often finds, what seems to be God’s silence on a vital life issue

is actually His deliberate strategy and pre-determined plan to bear us out. God finds out where a person's faith truly lies and the primary focus of his love. This is particularly true with regards to youth immersion; for both the young person desiring immersion and the person discipling him.

Parents and those giving counsel must use the greatest care and discretion in dealing with teen-age youth in many subject areas, but especially with regard to immersion. Readiness is as much a key to decision in this age range as any perceived "need," and possibly even more so. Ultimately the decision must belong to the young person. During this period parents are still responsible for guidance and direction, as well as the decisions and actions of the young person before God. To parents, and fathers specifically, the Scripture commands: "bring them [one's children] up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4b).

The following sections deal with four NT Scripture texts as basic factors in determining a young person's readiness for immersion.¹⁹ Although far from being exhaustive, these texts provide a foundation for discernment and decision on an individual basis. Christians of all ages are expected to successfully meet, by the grace of God, the standards and conditions spelled out in the Scriptures. Contrary to popular, emotionally-charged belief, it may be wiser to wait on immersion for those youth thirteen to nineteen years of age if there are any doubts as to the individual's maturity and/or spirituality.

Guardianship Factor: Galatians 4:1-2

"Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father." Galatians 4:1-2

The dynamics of guardianship; especially the jurisdiction of parents over their teen-aged offspring, as well as the responsibilities of these young people to God and their parents, are primary to any discussion of youth immersion. Galatians 4:1-2, whether understood as a statement of common fact in and of themselves, or examined in their context within the Galatian letter, yield valuable insight for the youth immersion issue. The Galatian letter itself was written by Paul to straighten out several salvation issues, as false teachers and Judaizers were disrupting these congregations. As the inspired writer reproved Christians in his day, his Words give the Church principles and insight for dealing with this current salvation issue today.

These verses are a simple statement of fact regarding civil laws of inheritance and property management for minors, that were commonly known by the Galatian readers in the first century. This principle of guardianship over minors is evident in all societies of man throughout history. Parents have authority; jurisdiction over their minor children. This, of course, is by God's

¹⁹These Scriptures do not primarily address the issue of youth immersion, as far as the author's original intent, but do yield principles and facts which can be gleaned to apply to decision making with regards to individual readiness for immersion into Christ.

design.²⁰

Galatians 4:1-2, as a statement of fact, contains several principles that specifically address the issue of youth immersion. As stated previously in “The Scriptural Status of Children” section of this paper, as a child the individual is numbered among those who “will inherit salvation” (Hebrews 1:14). In this Galatians text the child is likened to “a slave” who has no property rights “although he is the owner of everything.” That is to say, he [the child] will inherit heaven if he dies physically but has no direct responsibilities or discretionary involvement in his salvation before God at the present time. Rather he is under guardians and managers, ideally his Christian parents, who are responsible directly to God for him. Parents are to train up the child to become responsible enough to handle his own affairs - spiritually as well as physically.

Ephesians 6:1 states: “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” God’s pattern for subjection is clear- parents are to be obedient to God, as they raise their children. Fathers specifically are responsible to “bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4). Children are called to obey their parents as their primary authority, even before God.²¹ Jesus exemplified this at age twelve when He subjected himself to his earthly parents, rather than stay in the temple and be involved in His heavenly Father’s business (Luke 2:41-52).

Galatians 4:2 goes on to state that the child “is under guardianship and managers until the date set by the father.” Here fathers are given the authority, as well as the responsibility, by God to decide when it is appropriate to allow their teenager to transition into various adult roles and responsibilities. The timing for immersion is one of the most important (if not the most important) considerations during this period. As a word of caution, a father can not decide for his son or daughter - immersion is the individual’s decision and commitment to Christ. But fathers are in the position to decide if their teenager is mature and spiritual enough to make the decision for themselves.

In context, these verses are an illustration of how God worked with the nation of Israel to prepare them for the Messiah and His salvation. The physical nation of Israel is likened to children, not yet able to handle spiritual things. The Law is likened to parental jurisdiction, “guardians and managers,” put over youth to protect and train them toward self-government by faith. Galatians 3:23-24 reads: “But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith.”

²⁰William and Colleen Detric, The Little Book of Christian Character and Manners, pg. 45-51: parental authority is described very clearly in this section. On pg. 36-39 the authors describe the possible dangers of church youth groups in usurping parental authority. It is the Church’s job to evangelize adults, and help them in developing Godly parenting skills - not to usurp their God ordained authority over their children.

²¹This is not to say that parental authority is inconsistent with, or opposed to, God’s authority. Actually they are designed to work in harmony, parental authority as an extension of God’s authority: Ephesians 6:1-3.

This revealed plan and strategy of God's, in bringing up His people to faith, maturity, and ultimately freedom, should be emulated by Christian parents today. Children need to be under structured, loving bondage, with detailed rules and consequences clearly communicated, which are then consistently and diligently enforced. Parents are to be as the Law to their teenagers, tutoring them through their youth to adult maturity. The purpose of the Law was "to lead us to Christ" (Gal. 3:24); and so also, is the goal of Christian parents.

In Gal. 3:27, three verses ahead of the Gal. 4:1-2 text, immersion is cited: "For all of you who were baptized (immersed) into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." Here immersion is described as the way "into Christ" and how a person is "clothed" or covered, which indicates the process of atonement. Gal. 3:26, leading into this statement concerning immersion, states: "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus." In this context then, faith saves an individual; immersion being the act of faith which places a person into Christ and secures atonement for him before God.

Inclusive to the act of immersion, as presented in the Galatian letter, is "the adoption as sons" (Gal. 4:5) and specifically as "sons of God" (Gal. 3:26). The reception of the indwelling Holy Spirit into the body of the believer, which takes place as one comes up out of the water of Christian immersion by faith,²² seals the adoption (Gal. 4:6). This adoption aspect of immersion has very important ramifications for youth immersion, in that when one is adopted, the legal jurisdiction of the biological parents ceases. This being the case, the father must decide if his teenager can successfully obey Christ by faith, rather than needing his parents physical presence and constraints to live in accordance with God's Word.

The final application to the issue of youth immersion, as derived from the context of Gal. 4:1-2, concerns timing. Timing, of course, is the foundational issue in discussing youth immersion. Gal. 4:4 states: "But when the **fullness of time** came, God sent forth His Son..." This "fullness of time" refers back to the illustration given in Gal. 4:2 concerning the "date set by the father." As God patiently worked with His people, bringing them to a prepared state, so also earthly fathers are to diligently lead and train their teenagers until they are ready for immersion into Christ: their personal "fullness of time." Timing is always important; this area of Scripture underlines the critical importance of timing for immersion, and very much more so for youth still under their parent's jurisdiction and nurture.

Children and youth are under the guardianship of their parents. This means that although they are heirs of God's kingdom, they are under their parent's jurisdiction. It is the fathers prerogative to decide if and when his teenage son or daughter is ready for immersion, and is accountable to God for his offspring's preparation to this end.

²²Jesus' immersion is the example here, as the Holy Spirit came down from Heaven in the likeness of a dove as Jesus came up out of the water - Matthew 3:16 and Mark 1:9. Also Acts 19:1-5 indicates that the Holy Spirit is received at immersion.

The Marriage Factor: Ephesians 5: 22-33

22. Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. 24. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. 25. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, 26. so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27. that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless. 28. So husbands ought also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He who loves his own wife loves himself; 29. for no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ also does the church, 30. because we are members of His body. 31. FOR THIS CAUSE A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER, AND SHALL CLEAVE TO HIS WIFE; AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. 32. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church. 33. Nevertheless, let each individual among you also love his own wife even as himself; and let the wife see to it that she respect her husband.

The Scriptures found in this text squarely address the child/youth immersion issue; for when an individual is immersed into Christ, he is in effect marrying Christ. In this text physical marriage in the flesh and the Christian's spiritual marriage to Christ are tightly interwoven, revealing truths concerning both covenants. Verses 22-30 primarily give instruction concerning physical marriage by using the example of Christ and how He has sacrificed for, and now ministers to, the Church. Then verses 31-32 reverse the direction of the teaching, using the original marriage of Adam and Eve as an example to reveal the spiritual union of Christ and His Church.

Immersion is denoted in verse 26 with the phrase "having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word". The "water" refers to immersion, the "cleansing" refers to the forgiveness of sins, and "with the word" refers to the Bible faith required during the act of immersion that activates the power of God. This is consistent with other Scripture texts such as Acts 2:38 and I Peter 3:21. The purpose for immersion is also given in this verse; "that He [Jesus] might sanctify her;" the bride being set apart for Jesus' holy purposes.²³ The expectation of Christ is that the Christian will then be subject to Him "in everything"(v. 24). This is the very heart and substance of His being Lord.²⁴ At immersion the individual commits himself to the Lordship of Christ, and submits to His absolute authority-second to no one!

²³Vine, *op. cit.*, pg. 317: Sanctify (HAGIASMOS) means a) "separation to God", and b) "the course of life befitting those so separated."

²⁴This dovetails with I Peter 3:6, where the wife is given the example of Sarah, to call on her husband as "Lord".

In considering the Lordship of Christ, the implications of Ephesians 5:31 are of utmost importance. In this verse the man is required to “leave” his father and mother in order to “cleave” to his wife. Jesus left heaven to become flesh and blood to meet humanity at our level in order to become the perfect husband. Implicit in the dialogue of verse 31, and went without saying for the readers of that day, is the response of the bride: to leave her parents and cleave to her husband in order to become one body with him. This rendering is consistent with verses 22 and 24 of Ephesians 5; for subjection “in everything” is impossible without the bride “leaving” her parents and cleaving to her husband. This being the case, it would seem that a young person would need to “leave” his parents’ jurisdiction in order to “cleave to,” and become one with, Christ in immersion. Again, as also evidenced in the “Guardianship Factor,” God’s Word speaks clearly that youth immersion is only scriptural if the individual is mature enough to handle adult responsibilities and situations for himself.

In relating immersion to marriage, another criteria for evaluating whether or not a teen-aged youth is ready for immersion becomes apparent. If a young person is not mature enough to handle physical marriage, he is certainly not mature enough to handle the spiritual marriage to Christ.²⁵ In this way Ephesians 5:22-33, as it defines the roles, duties, and responsibilities in marriage, becomes a very useful gauge for discernment and decision-making with regard to youth immersion.

The Soldier Factor - Ephesians 6: 10-18

10. Finally, be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of His might. 11. Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. 12. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places. 13. Therefore, take up the full armor of God, that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14. Stand firm therefore, HAVING GIRDED YOUR LOINS WITH TRUTH, and HAVING PUT ON THE BREASTPLATE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, 15. and having shod YOUR FEET WITH THE PREPARATION OF THE GOSPEL OF PEACE; 16. in addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming missiles of the evil one. 17. And take THE HELMET OF SALVATION, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. 18. With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints.

In this text, the Christian is likened to a soldier and the nature of the spiritual war being fought by the Lord’s Church is described. This analogy coincides with other texts, such as II Timothy 2:3 and II Corinthians 10:3-6. The enemy is clearly identified in verses 11 and 12 as “the devil,” “rulers,” “powers,” “world forces of darkness,” and “spiritual forces of wickedness.” The

²⁵This is not to be misconstrued to suggest that a person should marry physically before being immersed; generally, counsel should be quite to the contrary. The statement here concerns the gauge of readiness.

Scripture then commands the Christian to “take up the full armor of God” and “stand firm”(v.13). The Scripture goes on to name the various pieces of armor (v. 14-17): relating each piece of equipment to its spiritual counterpart.

Salvation is named out as the Christian’s “helmet.” Note that the helmet (salvation in Christ), which is accomplished at immersion, is the last piece of armor put on. The articles of “truth”, “righteousness,” “preparation of the Gospel,” and “faith” are secured prior to the helmet; which is particularly relevant to our discussion of youth immersion. This sequence for armoring up reveals considerable preparation prior to putting on salvation, which youth desiring immersion should be counseled toward.²⁶ These areas of preparation for spiritual battle are opportunities to reduce casualties and expedite victory for the future.

The physical reality of warfare is that the helmet is worn when engagement with the enemy is eminent and/or expected. Immediately after Jesus was immersed, He was impelled by the Spirit to go out into the wilderness and do battle with the devil (Matt. 4:1-11). If immersion constitutes enlistment into God’s army, then boot camp may be very short indeed before the Christian is needed on the front lines. When the nation Israel was numbering its ranks for the invasion of Canaan, as discussed previously, only men “20 years and upward” were enlisted. Even in our nation today the requirement is 18 years of age.

The stresses and sacrifices of the spiritual war that the Christian fights are at least as great as physical warfare; indeed, eternal life and death are at stake. This being true, one questions the legitimacy of enlisting young teens. If 18-20 year olds have difficulty coping with physical warfare, how could a younger person be expected to “keep his head” in a spiritual fire fight? And much more so against a foe who has been fine-tuning his war machine for the past 2,000 years! In fact, most young people during their teenage years are too immature to handle physical warfare. Is it logical, then, to encourage or even allow most teenagers to be immersed and enter the spiritual war now raging?

Wise Christian parents should gradually expose their teen-aged youth to the nature and scope of the spiritual battle now in progress. This will help motivate these young people to prepare for their entrance into the fray. By girding themselves with memorized Scripture, developing holy habits and moral reasoning, accompanying adults as they go to share the Gospel with lost individuals, and practicing with the shield of faith, young people can prepare themselves for the aftermath of immersion into Christ. In this way he can grow into his armor and at the proper time put on the helmet of salvation and wield the sword of the Spirit as a liberating soldier of Christ.

The Priesthood Factor - Revelation 1:5b-6, I Peter 2:9

“To Him who loved us, and released us from our sins by His blood, and He has made us to be

²⁶This is not to institute prerequisites for immersion or create a law system for preparation prior to immersion. Instead, if the individual has time and is decidedly not mature enough for immersion, he should be encouraged to engage in these areas of preparation.

a kingdom, priests to His God and Father; to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen.” Revelation 1:5b-6

“But you are a CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A PEOPLE FOR GOD’S OWN POSSESSION, that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” I Peter 2:9

These two passages clearly indicate that every Christian is a priest. Revelation 1:5-6 connect the individual’s being “released” from sin and his being made a priest to God. Therefore: when a person is released from his sins, which takes place at immersion into Christ (i.e. Acts 2:38, 22:16), Christ makes him a priest. So in a real sense, immersion functions as an ordination ceremony for priesthood.

In introducing the fact that all Christians are priest, I Peter 2:5 states: “you, also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood...” This text indicates that individual Christians are building blocks of “a spiritual house,” which would constitute the Lord’s Church (the collective body of Christians) being likened to the OT temple. This correlates with I Corinthians 6: 19-20 precisely: “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.” It is noteworthy, with regards to the question of youth immersion, that when preparations were being made to replace the OT tabernacle with a temple of stone, the age of 20 years old and upward was established for the priesthood of that house (I Chronicles 23:24).

Most significantly, I Peter 2:5 also defines the purpose of the NT priesthood: “to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ Jesus.” Jesus states that the NT priest “must worship in spirit and truth” (John 4:24). The primary priestly duty of the Christian in this spiritual worship is defined as presenting his body as “a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1). Simply put, these priestly sacrifices include “doing good and sharing” (Hebrews 13:16), all generated from the following mindset: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Philippians 2: 3-4). The fact is, most teenagers could not be expected to understand these things, much less implement them into a lifestyle of total worship.²⁷ The natural tendency for this age group is to be self-centered rather than to be others-centered.

Not only is the Christian a priest, but I Peter 2:9 calls him out as a member of a “royal priesthood”, Christ being the royal high priest. With regards to royalty, Christ is “the king of kings,” “the government is upon His shoulders,” and He is seated on His Father’s throne.²⁸ Christ’s position of royalty not only regards authority and rule, but also judgment. Psalm 9:7-8a

²⁷Jay Wilson, “Total Worship,” The Gospel Truth, (January 1, 1981), pg. 1-9: for a great study on the concept of total worship.

²⁸Scripture References: “The king of kings” - I Timothy 6:15, “The government is upon His shoulders” - Isaiah 9:6, He is seated on his Father’s throne - Revelation 3:21.

states; “But the LORD abides forever; He has established His throne **for judgment** and He will judge the world in righteousness.” The New Testament Scriptures clearly reveal that the Christian is “seated” with Christ presently (Eph. 2:6), and is to judge with Him as a spiritual man or woman (i.e. I Cor. 5:12, 10:15, 11:29, 31).

Christians are not only called to judge in the NT, but expected to judge competently. In I Corinthians 6: 2-3, through a series of rhetorical questions, this point is clearly made: “Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to *constitute* the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life?” The literal question then comes before us: “Are most teenagers able to judge competently at even the lowest level of civil courts?” Generally not, for this age group lacks the experience, comprehension, and in-sight to judge such cases. The I Corinthian text above implies that the Christian is being groomed by judgments here and now to “judge the world” and angels in the future!

Both positions of priest and judge call for an attitude of utmost seriousness. The NT uses the term “sober” often to describe this frame of mind. I Peter 1:13 puts it this way: “Therefore, gird your minds for action, keep **sober** in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.” Most likely, youth ages thirteen to nineteen are not disposed, even if capable, to this degree of seriousness. These are adult positions of responsibility.

On a purely practical level, society often pushes youth into adulthood far too fast, even without these spiritual expectancies. With all good judgment, Christian parents and Church leaders should allow these young people time to grow into the stature required for these positions of service. When they are ready and prepared, then they can take the reins. To allow youth to try to shoulder adult responsibilities too early may in fact ruin them for the future.

Dangers of Premature Immersion

Many well-meaning Christian parents and Church leaders employ immersion of children and youth as a means of aiding their young people. Unfortunately, their good intentions serve to do harm to the individual who is prematurely immersed and the Church in general. This truth parallels the theme of Rappaccini’s Daughter,²⁹ where the loving father tries to protect his beautiful daughter and in so doing, destroys any hope for fulfillment in her life. The following are several areas of danger that arise when children and youth are routinely immersed. The consequences are very real and readily apparent in the Church today.

The most obvious danger in child immersion regards the young person who is overwhelmed by the intensity of the spiritual life in Christ and drops out. Note the statistics in Appendix I, and especially the drop out rate for ages eight through twelve. Generally, once a person has “tried

²⁹Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” in American Poetry and Prose, II, pg. 102-124.

religion” and found it wanting, it is much more difficult to persuade them to embrace the one immersion of true New Testament Christianity.

Jesus commands each person to “calculate the costs” of following Him before making the commitment to do so; Luke 14: 25-35. A child can not possibly understand, much less calculate, many of the costs of being a Christian. A universal example exists in the “lust of the flesh” (I John 2:16): a child can not comprehend the power and influence of these worldly forces within his own body, which he is committed to bring under control as a Christian, until he reaches puberty. Making such a life long commitment from a position of naiveté, is at best, unwise. Often it leads to the young person being blind sided and eventually overwhelmed.

Another danger common in immersing young people concerns their reason(s) for doing so. Many children and youth often have childish and/or non-scriptural reasons, even when they can recite appropriate Scriptures or give adequate explanations for desiring to be immersed. Such unacceptable reasons would include: wanting to please parents, pressure from peers, desiring to become a part of the “grown-up” group, getting to participate in the Lord’s Supper, and inordinate fears or guilt.

According to Acts 2:38 a person is immersed in the name of Jesus Christ **for** the forgiveness of sin and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The word “for” denotes the scriptural reasons for immersion into Christ: forgiveness of sin and receiving the Holy Spirit.³⁰ Any other reasons for being immersed are not scripturally valid: and therefore do not constitute the faith required to make the act of being immersed in water the “one baptism”(Ephesians 4:5) of the New Testament. Without the Biblically specified faith at immersion, all one accomplishes is getting wet.

A very subtle danger exists with the individual who is immersed as a child and continues to do notably well in the Church. As stated in Proverbs: “foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child” (Prov. 22:15). As his parents, along with other adults, support and encourage his “christianity,” the child has a tendency to become “wise in his own eyes” (Proverbs 26:5). At the same time, these dynamics tend to strip away the very character trait of humility that makes the child “the greatest in the kingdom” (Matt. 18:4). Rather than humbling himself as he enters adulthood to become conformable to New Testament Christianity, the young person is driven in the opposite direction; “to think more highly of himself than he ought to think” (Romans 12:3). As this individual continues to acquire more knowledge the tendency towards arrogance increases, as stated in I Cor. 8:1. Along these lines, II Cor. 10:12 speaks strongly and clearly concerning “those who commend themselves; when they measure themselves by themselves, and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding.”

Although this end result may not be inevitable, it is certainly a clear possibility for those immersed pre-maturely as children. Jesus’ statement in Luke 8:18 fits this situation very well: “Therefore take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him shall *more* be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him.”

³⁰Alfred D. Marshall, “The Interlinear English-Greek New Testament,” in the Zondervan parallel New Testament in Greek and English, pg. 349; in the word “for” in Acts 2:38 is literally translated: “[with a view] to.”

Another clear danger in child immersion has to do with the individual's potential for love in the scriptural sense. Love is described as the "more excellent way" (I Cor. 12:31) and "the greatest" (I Cor. 13:13) of the character traits that God desires in His people. In the parable of the two debtors (Luke 7: 41-43), Jesus concludes by stating "he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). This principle applies to a child's immersion in that the younger a child is immersed, the less there is to forgive - if in fact forgiveness is even necessary. Hence the person's potential to love may be lessened.

The great apostle Paul is an excellent example of the relationship between forgiveness and love. Paul considered himself to be the "foremost" of all sinners before his immersion, but found "the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus" (I Tim. 1: 14-15). His love for Jesus, who forgave him his debt, caused Paul to excel all the more: "His grace toward me did not prove vain; but **I labored even more than all of them**, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." (I Cor. 15:10). Could the Church possibly be robbing itself of greater potential by immersing its young people prematurely?

There can also be a danger posed to the Church collectively. The standards of the Church are necessarily lowered in order to accommodate children, as well as immature youth, as Christians. Playing "church" has always been a serious problem, even for adults who are in Christ; which includes recreational fun and games, ritualistic worship, providing employment opportunities for hirelings, various church-growth schemes, hypocrisy, and rationalization of sin. Catering to children as Christians with various youth groups, youth activities, and children's Church services, only serves to compound the problem of games being played in the Church. The Church is supposed to be God's resurrected army, sent out to seek and save the lost, thereby hastening Christ's return!

Of course this is not an exhaustive listing, nor an in-depth study, of the possible dangers of child and youth immersion. But hopefully this cursory review of the scope and nature of the problem will awaken the Church to its inherent dangers.

Conclusion

Child/youth immersion is a most emotionally - charged, sensitive subject. This probably explains why there is very little written on this issue which contains much scriptural substance or conviction.

As with any biblical doctrine, and especially with volatile issues, Christians are charged to "speak the truth in Love" (Eph. 4:15). Biblical love contains all mercy, kindness, gentleness, and patience: expecting one to put himself in the other person's situation. At the same time the truth of God's word; its meanings, principles, and intentions, must never be compromised. To compromise truth is to **not** love God or one's neighbor. Therefore, to speak the truth in love is always done for the other person's ultimate good.

For the child or immature youth who earnestly desires to be immersed there must be a great sensitivity to their needs and idealism. Great care must be taken so as not to discourage enthusiasm or impair faithfulness in the young person. Instead counsel must direct these young

people to prepare, as Christ Himself did, for their future commitment to the Lord in immersion. The development of spiritual habits, such as Scripture memorization and prayer are appropriate disciplines for young people to practice prior to immersion.

If a young person asks to be immersed, this may indicate his position. The concept of “asking permission” indicates he may be unsure and/or wanting an adult authority to decide for him. Since immersion must be the individual’s decision, indeed conviction before God, the young person should be gently and positively counseled in the Scriptures to continue preparing for immersion into Christ.

When a young person demands and/or adamantly pursues immersion, understanding the Scriptures and personal commitment involved, he needs to be taken seriously. Discussion and dialogue using appropriate Scriptures must challenge him to readiness with “great patience and instruction” (II Tim. 4:2).³¹

Many children of faithful Christians want to be immersed because of inordinate guilt and fears. Often this is due to a steady diet of evangelistic preaching from the pulpit during various Church assemblies, with accompanying invitations. The Church leadership needs to recognize that evangelistic preaching should primarily take place **outside of the assemblies** for the saints. Pulpit preaching to the saints must provide food to grow on, putting the standard of Christ before His people - not a continual rehash of the plan of salvation. Preaching to Christians as new creations proclaims the individual’s new potential and possibilities, reproving and exhorting each one to excel all the more. Those in the assembly should already know the plan of salvation and be participating in sharing the Gospel with the lost! Emotional salvation appeals in the assemblies of the saints will cause young people to prematurely pursue immersion, often for invalid reasons.

An even more tender situation concerns the adult who was immersed as a child and currently is serving Christ with a sincere heart, and possibly even in a great capacity. The Church and individual Christians should honor and respect such individuals for their work, while at the same time not sidestepping the child immersion issue. The perpetuation of the unscriptural practice of child and premature youth immersion must stop. Individuals who have been immersed too soon in life must face their situation with an honest heart, remembering that “now is ‘the acceptable time,’ behold, now is ‘the day of salvation’” (II Cor. 6:2).

Apollos provides an excellent scriptural example of a man zealous in serving Christ with the knowledge and understanding he had, even before receiving the “one immersion” into Christ. Acts 18: 24-26 reads: “*Now a certain Jew named Apollos, an Alexandrian by birth, an eloquent man, came to Ephesus; and he was mighty in the Scriptures. This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he was speaking and teaching accurately the things concerning Jesus, being acquainted only with the baptism of John; and he began to speak out boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately.*” What these Christians explained to Apollos is not directly given in the Scriptures, but the context of the passage gives those “with ears to hear” a clear understanding of what happened.

³¹This paper was written with this situation, amongst others, in mind. The section entitled “A Scriptural Range for Youth Immersion” provides a Scriptural basis and dialogue for dealing with teenage youth considering immersion.

Obviously, Apollos was immersed in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The context bears this out in two ways. In verses 27 and 28 of Acts 18, which immediately follow Apollo's meeting with Priscilla and Aquila, Apollos was accepted by the Church "brethren" in Ephesus as a Christian and they encouraged him to travel and help the Church in other areas.

In the next section of Scripture Paul finds some disciples in Ephesus who also only know of John's baptism. Here the Scriptures detail the dialogue and teaching in Acts 19: 1-8, which would be consistent with what Apollos was taught by Priscilla and Aquila four verses earlier. The result was that "they were immersed in the name of the Lord Jesus" (v.5). The immediate proximity in the Word, and the parallel situations of Apollos and the twelve men in Ephesus, is probably not a coincidence; but instead, God's perfect way of sharing pertinent information.

Although the details and circumstances of Apollos are somewhat different than the situation of a faithful adult who has been immersed prematurely, the principle action is the same. In both cases Godly character enables a man to turn, by truth received, and be immersed into the one immersion of Christ and then continue in ministry to a fuller, truer extent than ever before possible.

The example of Apollos can and should be used as a cue for the Church in dealing with those who have been immersed prematurely in their youth, and are currently serving Christ as adults. These individuals should be taken aside and privately taught the Scriptures contained within this study. When they understand these things and are convicted by the Scriptures, then the one immersion into Christ is appropriate. These immersions should not be done secretly, but certainly without undue fanfare, even as the Scriptures themselves discreetly reveal Apollos' immersion into Christ in Acts 18 and 19. In this way the individual is able to "save face," maintaining the respect among those he has previously discipled, and then continue in ministry even more powerfully with the indwelling Holy Spirit. But those individuals who fail to repent and submit to scriptural immersion, on the Day of Judgment may hear Jesus say: "I **never** knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matthew 7:23).

The controversy concerning child and youth immersion ("baptism") most probably will continue to rage throughout the Lord's Church in these last days. Our adversary the devil will see to that!

As truth-seekers endeavoring to worship God in spirit and truth, all Christians need to face this issue in a reasonable and studious manner. Christian parents especially are charged with the responsibility to weigh the Scriptures, construct their personal convictions, and communicate God's will to their children in a consistent manner. Church leaders must serve as examples in the raising of their own children and so preach the Word from a position of proven life application, while at the same time respecting the God-ordained parental authority of others. To do anything less, would be to shrink back to destruction and return to the futile way of life inherited from our forefathers.

Appendix I – A profile of the Convert

Excerpts from *Why Churches Grow*, by Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr., Ph.D., Chapter 2, "A Profile of the Convert," pp. 26-29, "The Age Factor."

In the study of 720 subjects discussed throughout this chapter [adults, from various religious backgrounds], one of the individual characteristic variables that did not turn out to be significant in distinguishing among converts, drop-outs, and non-converts was the age factor... There is reason to suspect that the conversion process is somewhat different for children who are brought up by members of the church of Christ. For them, there is no alienation from an earlier reference group identification... A follow-up study was done to investigate this matter.

The records of several randomly selected congregations were studied for the period 1965-1970 in order to identify 200 subjects who were baptized at various ages. In no case was there any record in these congregations of children being baptized before the age of 8, so that was selected as the starting point.

TABLE 5
PRESENT STATUS AND AGE AT TIME OF BAPTISM

Subject Categories	Age at which Subject was Baptized								TOTALS
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Still Faithful	7	9	11	12	15	15	16	17	102
Drop-Outs	18	16	14	13	10	10	9	8	98
TOTALS	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	200

The relation shown in Table 5 is quite weak, although statistically significant. As you go across the row for those who are still faithful, notice how the numbers in the cells get larger and larger as the age of baptism increases and notice how the reverse is true with those who dropped out of the church.

Results of a test comparing those who were re-baptized and those who were not re-baptized on the variable of the age at which they were baptized originally are presented in Table 6. Notice how the younger the subject was at the time of his original baptism, the more likely he was to be re-baptized.

TABLE 6
RE-BAPTISM AND AGE
AT THE TIME OF THE ORIGINAL BAPTISM

Subject Categories	Age at which Subject was Baptized Originally								TOTALS
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Re-Baptized	7	8	7	7	4	3	0	0	36
Not Re-Baptized	0	1	4	5	11	12	16	17	66
TOTALS	7	9	11	12	15	15	16	17	102

One final test was done with these data. In this test, the subjects who were eventually re-baptized were grouped with those who dropped out and this group was compared with those subjects who were not re-baptized and did not drop out. Results of that test are shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7
PRESENT STATUS AND AGE
AT THE TIME OF ORIGINAL BAPTISM

Subject Categories	Age at which Subject was Baptized Originally								TOTALS
	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	
Still Faithful, Not Re-Baptized	0	1	4	5	11	12	16	17	66
Re-Baptized or Dropped Out	25	24	21	20	14	13	9	8	134
TOTALS	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	25	200

The data reported in Table 7 make it very clear that age at the time of baptism is an important factor. Only 2 percent of those who were baptized before the age of 10 remained faithful and were satisfied with their original baptism

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