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Conducted by  
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**“ Churches of Christ have been criticised for their stand against infant baptism and for permitting, at the same time, young children of nine years old to be immersed. Is it possible for such a young child to be a ‘disciple’ before baptism to fulfil the requirements of Matthew 28:19? Further, if the parents are not members of the church can these young children reasonably be expected to remain faithful, particularly in view of 2 Peter 2:20, 21?”**

The question conveniently consists of three sentences and I will try to divide my answer into three parts, each part dealing with a sentence in the question.

### **(1) Infant Baptism Impossible According to Scripture**

Yes, I have no doubt at all that churches of Christ have been, and are, criticised for standing against the practice of many religious bodies—infant baptism. It is news to me, however, that they are also criticised for immersing young children of nine years old, but the questioner has apparently come across such criticism and so I wholeheartedly accept that this is so. Criticism in the first case is completely unjustified but may be justified in the latter case—it all depends on the nine-year-old child.

The churches of Jesus Christ have always deprecated the practice of infant baptism, on the simple grounds that the practice has no scriptural authority, and is culpably misleading to the person concerned in convincing him, all through life, that he is a baptised person. Infant baptism is an error which is the logical descendant of another religious error—the doctrine of original sin. Space does not allow of a full discussion of the subject, but a few further remarks might be helpful to someone new to the subject. The “original sin” theory is that at birth we are born with the guilt of Adam’s

sin upon us (see Rom. 5:12, which says "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned"). We notice that *death* was the consequence of Adam's sin and so death (the *consequence* of Adam's sin) passed upon all men. Therefore the *consequence* of Adam's sin is upon us at birth (in that we will die physically) but the *guilt* of Adam's sin does not pass upon us. We are born guiltless, pure and innocent and remain so until we become old enough to transgress God's laws and will. Each person will answer only for the deeds done in his or her own body. Psalm 51:5 is another verse often quoted to justify the theory of original sin, where David says "Behold I was shapen in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me." We notice that David says he was *conceived* in sin—he does not say that he was *born* a sinner. If sin in any way attaches to a conception all and any guilt lies with the parties to the union and not with the resultant child. Neither is it a sin to be born, as adherents to this doctrine often declare. In the beginning God commanded Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth" (Gen. 1:28) and so "the sin" in the Garden of Eden was disobedience to God in respect of the eating of fruit from a tree and had no reference whatever to their sexual union.

The Bible definition of sin is "a transgression of God's laws" (1 John 3:4) and "all unrighteousness is sin" (1 John 5:17). There are sins of commission and sins also of omission (see James 4:17). A moment's reflection should convince us that a new born infant can't commit sin either by commission or omission, is completely ignorant of God's laws and is thus perfectly sinless in God's eyes. As baptism is for *the remission of sins*, and salvation from sins (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Acts 22:16) then obviously baptism was never intended for babies and can render them no service. The Roman Catholic church and many of the denominations believe that if a baby dies, even shortly after birth, it will be consigned to "limbo" because of "original sin," and this the churches of Christ deny and oppose. A nurse here once told the writer of a case where the local priest telephoned the hospital to say he couldn't manage to call to "baptize" one of the newborn babies there, and, as it was considered an urgent matter, would she please do it—and he commenced to give her instructions as to how she should go about it. This illustrates perhaps the serious way in which infant baptism is regarded in some quarters.

Apart from the fact that babies are not fit subjects for baptism in that they have no sins for remission, we find, as we might expect, that the New Testament teaches that the privilege of baptism is reserved for:—

- (1) *Taught persons* — "Go ye therefore and *teach* all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19);
- (2) *Believing persons* — "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:16). "If thou believest with all thine heart thou mayest" (Acts 8:37);
- (3) *Penitent persons* — "Repent ye and be baptized every one of you . . ." (Acts 2:38);
- (4) *Confessing persons* — "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37). Confession is to be made with the mouth (Rom. 10:10).

The above facts from the New Testament place it beyond doubt that small infants are not fit candidates for immersion and that therefore the practice of baptizing infants is contrary to the intentions of Christ. Sometimes "household" baptisms are quoted as giving sanction to the practice, but if we look again at these instances we shall see that these households contained only those who could hear the gospel and believe it.

This brings us to the question of criticism being aimed at the immersion of a child, say nine years old, and prompts us to ask, "At what age a child comes within the scope of Christ's commands?" To my mind, this age is determined not so much by the age at which the child becomes capable of sin but rather the age at which the child can understand the facts concerning Christ and His way of redemption; and these ages could well differ in the case of the *same* child. Again this qualifying age would differ in *different*

children. Some children are more perceptive than others, and some children have better opportunities of learning the facts about Christ than others. John Stuart Mill, the noted English economist, was a very perceptive child and by the age of three he had mastered the Greek alphabet and Latin grammar; by eight years of age he was a veritable scholar. By contrast, another child might still be striving to talk at three years. I therefore say that it all depends upon the aptitude and intelligence of the child as to whether they are proper subjects for baptism at nine, or eight, for that matter. Criticism of a nine-years-old would be justified if baptised “just to please Grandad,” or to “join the church” or because big brother John had been baptised, or other evidence of ignorance about what had been done. I know personally some children baptised about that age, who most certainly appear to know what took place and why. Age is therefore unimportant, provided there is complete awareness of what is transacted in obeying the gospel.

### **(2) Baptism Is By Understanding, Not By Age**

“Is it possible for such a young child to be a ‘disciple’ before baptism to fulfil the requirements of Matt. 28:19?” My understanding of the matter is that one becomes a disciple *after* baptism. A disciple is one who is prepared to be disciplined by the teacher or master. There is a specific mode of entry into the discipline or school of Christ, and this involves being immersed prior to entry. Certainly we have to be taught about Christ before we can believe in Him and make a decision to follow Him (as a disciple) but after we have decided to follow Him we must do so with “a clean sheet” and first “wash away” our sins in baptism. Obviously the questioner means “Can such a young child as a nine-year-old understand such things?” I have no doubt that *some* such children can—John Stuart Mill, I am sure, could have !

### **(3) Parents Not Members of the Church**

If the parents of such young persons were not members of the church., I agree that this would be a distinct disadvantage to the continuing fidelity of the child; but if the child had the required grasp of the gospel facts and a real faith in the Master, there seems no reason why, with the help and encouragement of church members, he or she should not continue faithful. This would be especially true if the non-Christian parents of the child had the child’s true interests at heart, and it would certainly put the child’s faith to the test.

The alternative would be to refuse nine-year-old children immersion even when confronted with the fact that they were fully aware of what baptism is all about. Who would be prepared to do this, I wonder ?