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A RESEARCH PAPER ON

BAPTISM & THE INTERRELATION OF MEANING TO SUBJECT, MODE & IMPACT
QUESTIONS & ISSUES

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Introduction

Water baptism is practiced by the vast majority of those who call themselves Christians, whether Protestant, Roman Catholic, or Eastern Orthodox. Furthermore, baptism has been consistently practiced by the Church throughout the entire history of the Christian faith. However, the method¹ (sprinkling, pouring, or immersion), subject (believers only or infants and believers), formulas (in Jesus' name or in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit) agent (clergy or laity), effect (sacrament vs. ordinance) and meaning of baptism have been issues of debate throughout Christian history, particularly since the time of the Protestant Reformation.²

Who may be baptized, believers only, or infants as well? Who may baptize, clergy or laity? What does baptism effect, that is, is it salvific or symbolic? Should the one being baptized have water sprinkled or poured on them, or should they be immersed? Is baptism properly understood as a sacrament, conveying grace to the participant, or as an ordinance, in obedience to the command of Christ? And finally, what does baptism mean, is it a picture of washing and purification from the taint of sin, forgiveness of sins and new birth, promise of the Holy Spirit, participation in Christ's death, burial and resurrection, a covenant sign, or an initiation into Christ's Body, the Church?³ While these do not represent all of the questions related to baptism they give a sampling of the myriad and difficult issues that are raised when we consider this rite of the Church.

If one seeks to understand or explain what baptism *means* they find themselves perplexed by a host of other questions that influence—to varying degrees—their answer to the question. Herein we examine the primary proposed meanings of baptism and how

¹ This is commonly referred to as the “mode” but throughout this paper we will use the word “method.”

² Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology For the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman’s Publishing, 1994), 520.

³ For a brief synopsis of each of these approaches to the meaning of baptism see Grenz, 522.

the questions regarding method, subject, and effect of baptism influence our understanding of those meanings.

Baptism: Six Proposed Meanings

There are six primary explanations that have been proposed for what is meant when we as Christians baptize. As listed above they are; a picture of washing and purification from the taint of sin, forgiveness of sins and new birth, promise of the Holy Spirit, participation in Christ's death, burial and resurrection, a covenant sign, and an initiation into Christ's Body, the Church.⁴ Perhaps due to the fact that each of these appears to have a biblical basis Christians across a wide denominational spectrum would likely claim that baptism in fact means many or all of these things to varying degrees.

However, as we will see, there is an interrelation between these meanings and the methods, agents, and effects of baptism that would make some of these meanings difficult to reconcile with the various views held by Christians.⁵ It is outside the scope of this paper—and the abilities of its author!—to propose solutions to these various issues. Thus we will not seek to defend or refute the variety of views that are put forth, leaving that work to others who are more qualified. Rather we will propose questions to stimulate the reader toward further study and a more integrated approach to their personal understanding of baptism.

⁴ Similarly the WCC Commission on Faith and Order, “Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry” describes the meaning of baptism under five headings; Participation in Christ’s Death and Resurrection; Conversion, Pardon and Cleansing; The Gift of the Spirit; Incorporation into the Body of Christ; and The Sign of the Kingdom. As listed in Charles Davis, “Today’s Culture and the Meaning of Baptism,” *Ecumenical Review* 39.2, April, 1987: 163—172. Database online: ATLA Serials [25 July 2006], 163.

⁵ T.M. Lindsay, “*Baptism*,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1: A—D, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdman’s Publishing, 1979), 422—423.

Washing & Purification

Some of the biblical texts that have been used to support the view that baptism is a picture and/or agent of washing and purification from sins are Acts 22:16, 1 Corinthians 6:11, Titus 3:4—6, and Hebrews 10:22. In a sacramental view, in which the thing itself conveys grace, the act of baptism would actually cleanse a person from the tainting effect of sins. If viewed as an ordinance, baptism would be understood to symbolize the washing and purification that has already been effected within the believer by the Holy Spirit.

It has been argued that the method of pouring—rather than immersion or sprinkling—best expresses this reality of baptism as a washing or purification.⁶ One might picture the benefit of a shower over a bath—to say nothing of a little sprinkle!—to remove a large amount of grime and filth from the body.⁷ If pouring is indeed a valid definition of the Greek *baptizo*⁸ then might pouring be a suitable, or even preferred, method for baptism? There seems to be OT evidence to support the notion of ritual cleansing by pouring (Exodus 40:12—15; Leviticus 16:4, 24; Isaiah 1:16—17; Jeremiah 4:14; Ezekiel 36:25) and baptism is in essence a ritual cleansing.⁹

Finally, and most importantly, do we as Christians recognize the benefit of baptism as a cleansing and washing from sins, either symbolically or actually? Do our traditions prohibit us from viewing baptism as such because we are locked into too rigid

⁶ Herbert Lockyer, Sr. ed., *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, s.v. “Baptism,” (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), 134.

⁷ “Among other things, baptism by pouring speaks eloquently of the cleansing we receive by the ‘washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit’ . . .” Abram G. Konrad, “Baptism: Method or Meaning?,” *Direction* 14.1, Spring 1985: 6—9. Database online: ATLA Serials [24 July 2006], 7.

⁸ This question has been heavily debated.

⁹ The Jewish system of ablutions, John’s baptism and the Qumran community are inter-testamental and early NT examples of washings that belong to the same tradition as the OT ablutions. cf. Jerome H. Neyrey, “*Baptism*,” in *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 92.

an understanding to allow for anything other than initiation into Christ's body, or a symbol of sharing in Christ's death, burial and resurrection, or one of the other meanings?

Forgiveness of Sins & New Birth

Closely related, but distinct, from the idea of baptism as a cleansing from the taint of sin is the notion that in baptism forgiveness of sins and new birth are either affected and/or pictured. The primary passages that are quoted to demonstrate the relationship between baptism and forgiveness from sins are Mark 16:16,¹⁰ Acts 2:38, and 1 Corinthians 6:11. Perhaps the most popular verse used in this regard is John 3:3—5 which reads,

“Jesus answered him [Nicodemus], ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’...‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.’”¹¹

This verse is generally used to support the idea of the new birth occurring in—or being symbolized by—baptism,¹² while there are other verses used to support the notion (cf. Acts 22:16; Ephesians 5:26; Hebrews 10:22; 1 Peter 3:21—22). Contained in these

¹⁰ It should be noted that due to the questionable nature of Mark 16:9—20 few theologians would argue from this verse. Dau's contention that the passage “contains nothing that is contrary to the doctrine of Scripture in other places on the same subject,” W.T.H. Dau, “*Baptism*,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1: A—D, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 425, might be challenged in regard to Mark 16:16 (which seems to suggest that baptism is necessary for salvation) by those who deny baptismal regeneration.

¹¹ All Scripture quotations taken from the NRSV.

¹² Although Leon Morris argues that the “water” spoken of in this verse should not be understood as baptism. See Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed., Ned B. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 190—194. He is not alone in this appraisal. See G.W. Bromiley, “*Baptism*,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1: A—D, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 412 for a discussion of the different approaches to interpreting “water” in John 3:5.

verses is the idea that a “sprinkling” occurs to wash us of our sins.¹³ Thus these verses have often been used by those who sprinkle to support their method, as well as the notion that a sprinkled infant is released from the guilt of original sin and has a change of disposition toward God affected through the sprinkled waters of baptism. Laying aside the controversial issue of infant baptism let us simply consider the validity of sprinkling. For those who embrace the view that baptism is a symbol and nothing more, would not sprinkling be a more fitting symbol than pouring or immersion to demonstrate the spiritual realities of having our “hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience,” (Hebrews 10:22)?¹⁴ The last question dealt with method, the next with the question of whether baptism should be considered a sacrament or an ordinance. These verses would indicate that baptism is no mere symbol, that it is in fact something more than an outward, physical sign. Indeed, they seem to speak to the necessity and agency of baptism for salvation itself. For those with a strictly ordinance based view can these verses be explained without doing violence to the biblical text and context? Or, more pointedly, can there be any explanation for Peter’s statement that, “...baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you,” (1 Peter 3:21a) if baptism is nothing more than an outward, physical symbol?¹⁵

Promise of the Holy Spirit

Passages that have been used to develop the idea that water baptism is a seal or promise of the Holy Spirit include Acts 2:38, 8:17—19, 1 Corinthians 12:13, and Titus

¹³ See also Hebrews 9:13—14; 1 Peter 1:2. There is dependence upon the OT tradition for sprinkling as well (e.g. Exodus 29:21; Leviticus 4:5, 14:16; Numbers 8:7).

¹⁴ However, one could argue from this verse that while the heart is sprinkled, the body is to be “washed with pure water.”

¹⁵ See Peter H. Davids, *The first epistle of Peter*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed., Ned B. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1990), 144—145 for a helpful exegesis of the verse.

3:5. Regardless of the individual interpretations of these verses it seems clear that we are to understand that there is a close and intimate connection between the act of water baptism and the reception of the Holy Spirit. Regarding methodology one might ask which of the three methods—sprinkling, pouring, immersion—best conveys the notion that the Spirit is promised? Some who prefer pouring would suggest that because the Spirit is going to be poured out on the one who is baptized (cf. Acts 2:1—2, 38) it is fitting to prepare for the event by pouring water on them first.¹⁶

Now let us turn towards questions regarding the relation of the Spirit to baptism. How well do our various *pnuematologies* adapt themselves to the understanding of the Holy Spirit's work in the believer in relation to baptism that is expressed in these verses? What expectation of the Spirit's action should an individual have when they are baptized? Can the view of baptismal regeneration be reconciled with the notion that baptism bears with it a future promise of the Spirit? Finally, how are we to describe the Spirit's work in the individual before, during and after water baptism in light of these verses and do our baptisms and doctrines concerning baptism address these issues or is the Spirit's work ignored?

Participation in Christ's Death, Burial & Resurrection

Romans 6:1—5 stands as the primary passage¹⁷ from which the idea is developed that in baptism the individual participates in the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ.¹⁸ From the perspective of an ordinance this is seen as an outward symbol of an

¹⁶ Lockyer, 134. Konrad also writes, "...pouring also signifies the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon believers," (Konrad, 7).

¹⁷ See also Colossians 2:11—13, verse 12 reads, "...buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead."

¹⁸ For a summary of the different views concerning the believer's participation in this process see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed., Ned B. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's Publishing, 1996), 361—365.

inward reality. The baptism itself does not cause the participant to partake in Christ's death, burial and resurrection; rather because they already have partaken of it through conversion they are simply performing a physical act to symbolize this spiritual communion with Christ. A sacramental view would argue that in the act of baptism one actually shares in Christ's death, burial and resurrection. In either case baptism by immersion would seem the most fitting picture or means of participating in Christ's saving event as the one being immersed descends into the water (death), remains for a moment (burial), and is raised up out of the water (resurrection).¹⁹ This tri-part symbolism is apparently lacking in the methods of sprinkling and pouring. Thus it could be questioned how appropriate the methods of sprinkling and pouring are for expressing this element of what baptism means. Furthermore, one could question how it is that an infant could take part in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, something apparently shared in by faith, when they are incapable of having faith?²⁰ One must also weigh the question of sacrament versus ordinance in relation to this idea. Romans 6:1—5 and Colossians 2:11—13 seem to indicate that it is the process of baptism itself that gives a share in Christ's salvific event, the language of imagery and symbolism must be inserted into the biblical text. Is the process of baptism simply an outward sign of an inward reality, or does it in fact have a critical share of that inward reality?²¹ The question could

¹⁹ "Immersion most clearly depicts what the ordinance of baptism is meant to signify, namely, the death and resurrection of Jesus and the believer's union with Christ...Submersion in water appropriately indicates death. And the bursting forth out of the watery grace illustrates resurrection life," (Grenz, 531).

²⁰ Although those who practice infant baptism would rely upon community or proxy faith (Catholics) or the potential or unconscious faith of the infant (some Lutherans). See Grenz, 528—529 for a brief discussion.

²¹ Moo argues that Romans 6:1—5 does not speak of symbolism at all, but that the word "baptism" is used to express the entire conversion experience. Therefore, the passage should be understood to mean that the individual truly shares in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, not symbolically, but spiritually and actually, and that this sharing happens in and through their conversion, of which baptism is an integral part. While his primary thesis—that baptism is here used in reference to the entire conversion experience—does not seem adequately supported his conclusions regarding the actual participation of believers in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are quite compelling and deserve our attention (Moo, 363—367).

well extend to obedience to any of Christ's commands. Is obedience to Christ's commands beneficial only if the Spirit is at work to renovate and re-create the human spirit or do acts of obedience to Christ based on some other motivation have value in and of themselves? And if the Spirit is at work, transforming the believer and motivating them to be obedient, are the acts of obedience empty symbols of an inward change or are they integral parts of that change? Finally, we should ask ourselves, what does it mean to be partakers of Christ in his death and resurrection life?²²

A Covenant Sign

The passage that is used to support the doctrine that baptism is a covenant sign is Colossians 2:11—12, wherein Paul speaks of a new circumcision that has occurred in the life of the believer, apparently affected by baptism. Many consider this passage to teach that baptism has replaced circumcision as the sign of the new covenant community.²³

This view of baptism serves to remind the believer that baptism is no superfluous act or empty symbol. Rather it is a recognizable mark of those who are in covenant with God, just as circumcision was for those under the covenant with Abraham. A covenant in this sense is a sacred agreement carrying powerful and sobering promises and consequences. The one who is baptized enters into the covenant family of God with all of its rights and responsibilities.²⁴ This passage, perhaps more than any other, has been used to support the practice of infant baptism. If, under the old covenant, babies were not only allowed, but required to be circumcised on the eighth day should we not baptize infants under the new covenant? Both those who embrace and those who oppose infant

²² For instance, Davis does well to remind us that, "Already here and now, through our baptism, we begin to live a transfigured life of grace, even though that life will find its full expansion and manifestation only after our individual deaths and the death of the human world. It is a misunderstanding of the symbolism of the resurrection to suppose that it occurs only at the last day." Davis, 165.

²³ Lockyer, 132—133.

²⁴ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Children of Promise* (Grand Rapids: Eerdman's Publishing, 1979), 38—51.

baptism should evaluate this question carefully as it is the linchpin of the argument for infant baptism.²⁵ This question also relates to our various understandings of the eternal state of the souls of infants. Our position on infant baptism factors into our discussions of original sin, guilt, and judgment in relation to infants.²⁶

We are also faced by the important and perplexing question, “What does it mean to be in covenant with God?” Navigating the waters of the new covenant can seem rather difficult in comparison with the highly structured form of the old covenant. Finally, we might ask how well our view of baptism as an ordinance—or a sacrament for that matter—adapts itself to the notion that baptism is the sign of a covenant between God and man. Is there the possibility of a covenant in the absence of this sign? Does the sign itself mark the beginning of the covenant? More pointedly, can the covenant be considered *bonafide* or “legal” without the sign of the covenant being performed, without the proverbial “cutting of the covenant”? We should let the words of the covenant theologians speak loudly to us on these questions.

Initiation into Christ’s Body, the Church

Finally we come to the last proposed meaning for baptism. Simply put, it is the idea that in the act of baptism one is initiated into the Body of Christ, the Church.²⁷ In this view baptism is the entry point into the family of God, whether one sees it as an act necessary and simultaneous to this entry or as a demonstration or testimony that the entry

²⁵ While support is also drawn from Jesus’ admonition to let the children come and be blessed by him (Mark 10:13—16, et al) and the “household” baptisms that occurred in the book of Acts (Acts 16:15, 33, et al) this understanding of baptism as the new covenant sign is the most direct and explicit teaching that supports the notion of infant baptism.

²⁶ See Lockyer, 132—133 for a discussion of some of the issues.

²⁷ “Baptism is not a private experience; it receives its significance as a public act...Baptism is a church ordinance; it is not a religious rite that one performs alone or independently.” Konrad, 6—7.

has occurred.²⁸ Passages that have been used to support this notion include Acts 2:41 and Galatians 3:26—28 as well as the multiple accounts of baptism in the book of Acts which indicate strongly that baptism was the initiatory rite into the Christian community (Acts 8:12, 38, 9:18, 16:15, 33, 18:8, et al).

How are we to understand this act of initiation which most readily finds its parallels in today's world in college fraternities and in the ancient world in the mystery religions and the baptism of Jewish proselytes? Does baptism guarantee a place in God's family or is further obedience required?²⁹ Is the act of baptism primarily the church's statement that an individual is part of God's family (in which case infant baptism may be appropriate) or is it more properly seen as that individual's statement that s/he is a part of God's family (in which case believer's baptism would be preferred)?³⁰ Is a person a member of the Body of Christ before they are baptized or do they only become a member when they undergo the initiation? More pointedly, are any of the rights or responsibilities of membership withheld from those who by necessity or choice abstain from baptism? For those who baptize infants does the infant become a member of the Body of Christ with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities associated with that membership or must they undergo further initiation before receiving the full benefits of

²⁸ Grenz suggests that, "Above all...baptism is oriented toward our participation in community," (Grenz, 523).

²⁹ See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed., Ned B. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, and Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 441—443 for the proposal that Paul's teachings regarding the Israelites baptism in the cloud and the sea in 1 Corinthians 10 should serve as a warning against placing too much trust in the performance of a sacrament apart from living a holy life.

³⁰ For a brief discussion of the problem see Grenz, 527—529. Konrad represents the believer's baptist view from a Mennonite Brethren perspective when he writes, "Baptism signifies an inner experience of faith in Jesus as the Christ; it is a public demonstration of a commitment to follow Jesus as Lord within the community of other believers...To be baptized implies that the individual affirms faith in Jesus," (Konrad, 6—7).

being a member of Christ's body (e.g. receiving the Eucharist)?³¹ This question has also been raised among the Mennonite Brethren where some churches allow church membership for those who have been baptized by sprinkling or pouring, but require baptism by immersion to be involved in ministry. One might ask, as Abram Konrad does in his insightful article, how, on biblical grounds, we could possibly distinguish between a baptism that initiates one into the Body of Christ and one that is required for ministry involvement?³²

This brings us to a larger question that must be faced by the entire Church, not just the Mennonite Brethren. How are we to deal with those who have been baptized by a method other than the one preferred by our denomination or personal belief system?³³ Suppose a person who was baptized by pouring as a believing adult wanted to join a church that practiced believer's baptism by immersion. Ought this person be required to once again undergo their initiation into the Body of Christ in order to accommodate the practice of that church? Perhaps more difficult is the case of the one who is baptized by sprinkling as an infant and ascends through the required rituals of the church (whether Protestant or Catholic). Supposing they have a genuine and personal experience of faith similar to that of their immersing or pouring brethren should they be required to undergo a new form of baptism in order to be accepted into the fellowship?³⁴ The crucial question to be faced is simply this, if baptism is the initiatory act by which one enters the Body of Christ then how must baptism be defined in order to genuinely fulfill the requirements of

³¹ This is not an issue in the Eastern Orthodox Church but is in the Roman Catholic and certain Protestant churches (Grenz, 528—529).

³² Konrad, 8—9.

³³ Konrad's entire article is well worth reading for insight along these lines.

³⁴ It is understood that infant sprinkling is more than simply a different method than believer's immersion or pouring. It is essentially different in terms of the subject as well. Thus the phrase, "a new form of baptism" refers both to differences in method and subject.

this initiation? And if the answer to this question leaves freedom regarding questions of subject, agent, method, etc. then should those differences ever be used to discriminate between that person and anyone else within the Body of Christ?³⁵

Conclusion

It has been our intent to provide the reader with stimulating questions that cause them to reevaluate their understanding of baptism in order to aid them in a process of integrating the fullness of biblical teaching on the subject into their baptismal paradigm. The questions presented herein do not have easy or simple answers for the one who is thoughtful and humble enough to read across a wide spectrum of understanding on the subject.³⁶ However, by exposing ourselves to the understanding of baptism held by others within the Christian faith community we can come to a fuller appreciation of all that baptism means. If in fact baptism does relate in important ways to washing and purification from the taint of sin, forgiveness of sins and new birth, the promise of the Holy Spirit, participation in Christ's death, burial and resurrection, a covenant sign, and initiation into Christ's Body, then it is a topic about which we should be very well informed so that we can experience and appreciate all of its rich meaning and benefits. We do ourselves an injustice if we remain locked in a prison of dogmatism where the limited explanation of our denominational heritage is the only view that we entertain.

³⁵ “What is certain is that our common incorporation into the Body of Christ is not to be identified with the unity of a single organized institution...The archetypal symbolism of baptism allows it to express a unity deeper than that of an institutional organization. The visible unity of Christians should be interpreted as a communion of mutual recognition and interaction, not as the structural unity of an organized social body,” (Davis, 169). While these comments certainly bear our attention it should be noted that by the end of Davis’ article he is endorsing a level of ecumenicism that is simply not supported by the Bible; the inclusion of other faiths into God’s redemptive plan (Davis, 171).

³⁶ As an introduction to the issues I recommend the excellent article on baptism in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 1: A—D, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1979), 410—425 which presents the biblical data on baptism and then the interpretation of it from Baptist, Reformed and Lutheran perspectives.

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