

Baptism as a Test Case *for the Nature and Limits of National Theology*

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For the seventeen or so years of independence one of the ardently sought goals of thoughtful evangelicals in the newly freed lands of the former Soviet Union has been a national theology. The desire for culturally contextualized answers to culturally contextualized questions is, of course, natural and valid and one I value for myself and Christians everywhere. Also driving the case in our context is an understandable and palpable frustration with the means offered for this task by Western missionary educators. Economic circumstances being what they are, it has been easy for Western missionaries to travel and teach in the East while Eastern evangelicals struggle with the means to keep body and soul together let alone to pursue serious theological reflection. The challenging side of such a scenario has meant for some a semi-colonization of Eastern evangelical thought by the West in the last couple of years. Western approaches, modes of thought, starting points, emphases, and blind spots, all dominate the theological education project as Western texts are translated and Western teachers come with little or no awareness of the Eastern church's long history and cherished intellectual tradition. The positive side of the current situation for evangelicals in the East is the potential for cross-pollination and enrichment that typically attains when different cultures listen to one another. This essay hopes to be a contribution in that latter category more than the former.

The Evangelium as the Parameter of Evangelical National Theology

Regardless of culture, race and time, the common ground for evangelical national theology of any sort must be the canon of Scripture and the worldview tradition contained therein. The Great Story of God's rule of His creation with its final revealed stage in the eternal Gospel of



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Jesus Christ is the *norma normans* for all who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ. This tradition writ large in both the inspired Old and New Testaments is the transcultural address of the living God “that shall be for all people” of all times and all places.¹ Whereas the historical churches (Roman and Orthodox) tend to locate the interpretive lens for Scripture in the subsequent life and teaching of the church (Holy Church Tradition), evangelicals find that lens primarily in the plotline of the *evangelium* prepared in the OT and fulfilled in the witness of the inspired apostles of the NT. It is this distinctly biblical tradition of Old and New Testaments standing temporally and hermeneutically prior to our human traditions that provides the lodestone without which any evangelical national theology will quickly sink into relativism, living out its numbered days in the ghetto of a particular culture and time. Such theology may indeed fulfill the task of being “national,” but it will utterly fail in the task of “theology”—the discovery, understanding, and application of that which may be universally known of the living God.²

Hence, it is the task of evangelical national theology to attempt to

accurately bring the divine tradition of Scripture, unencumbered with our transitory human traditions, to bear upon the issues of the day. But who is adequate for such things? What communion or individual on earth is able to escape the mold of its history in order to infallibly apply the fullness of biblical truth to its questions? The high ecclesiologies of the historical churches claim they can as the “body of Christ” bearing as they do His very Spirit and mind. Yet the incarnational paradigm that funds this confidence only illustrates for evangelicals how subtle the encroachment of human innovation can be to the biblical tradition. For Scripture itself claims the one-flesh union of marriage and the perichoresis of the Trinity as the paradigm of union of Christ and His body rather than the Incarnation (see Eph 5:30-32; cf. John 17:23). The Incarnation is indeed a potent heuristic in the divine economy of salvation, but revealed Scripture does not prefer it to explain the relationship of Christ and His church.³

For evangelicals this state of affairs has meant that the exegesis of the canonical Scriptures is the first order priority over the exegesis of the church’s own history. However, in

¹ Besides this text in Luke 2:10, which from the context clearly includes the universal scope of the Abrahamic covenant (cf. 1:55.73; 2:31.32) the gospel’s claim to be *supra* cultural and universal for human beings stretches from the *protoevangelium* of Gen 3:15 through Israel’s mission to the world in the OT (Deut 4:5-6; Ezek 39:21-29) and NT (e.g. Rom 10:12; 11:11-12) through Jesus Christ’s universal role as the Second Adam (Acts 4:12; 1 Cor 15:45) on to the final picture of the *summum bonum* for humanity of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation in Revelation (5:9; 22:2). Regardless of the success of subsequent generations of believers to maintain the integrity

of the gospel, Scripture claims a universal standard for its account of the Great Story.

² David F. Wells, “The Nature and Function of Theology,” in K. Johnston, ed., *The Use of the Bible in Theology: Evangelical Options* (Nashville: John Knox, 1985), ch. 10.

³ The former are a mysterious union between different personal centers who retain their own individuality, the Incarnation is a union resulting in only one personal center. See further Mark Saucy, “Evangelicals, Catholics and Orthodox Together: Is the Church the Extension of the Incarnation?” *JETS* 43/2 (June, 2000): 193-212.

the pursuit of our exegetical task we have not totally escaped our historical context either. The marks of an Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment historical critical zeitgeist that prefers the human diversity of Scripture's elements over their divine unity also are evident in Western evangelical scholarship. Evangelical NT theologies for example, easily follow their non-evangelical counterparts in the method of biblical theology (more) conservatively outlining the theology of the Synoptics, Paul, John, or the NT in toto. However, also like their peers, evangelical NT theologies can be too little informed by the one biblical theology that spans both testaments. The covenant-traversing themes of salvation-history that are unremarkable to the liberal historical critic because of what they presume about supernatural authorship also fail to get their due in our camp. The result is the odd case of an evangelical theology of the New Testament that gives little or no attention to the new covenant itself!⁴

It would seem, then, that all are compelled to admit that the theologi-

cal project for any generation of Jesus' followers, i.e. any national theology, must always be open to correction from the inspired biblical tradition or risk its own utter irrelevance. Plaintive cries that "we are Eastern..., or we are Western, Asian or European; rich or poor," all fall silent before the universal of Scripture's Gospel. But how is this openness to Scripture to be accomplished? Again we ask, Who can step out of his or her culture and fully engage Scripture? Indeed, everyone wants the moniker of "biblical" for their theology. Everyone wants to claim that their work is illumined by the Holy Spirit. Yet everyone also knows the truth of the ancient dictum, "*Biblia mater haereticorum est.*" Skill in marshalling disparate biblical texts to one's cause or national theology alone does not make a case.

There are two important means at the church's disposal to test the faithfulness of its theological syntheses to the one divine biblical tradition. Both are anchored in the new covenant identity of the Christian interpreter as heir of the new age of the Spirit who, according to Peter, remains the

⁴ Evangelical NT theologies with little or no reference to the prophesied new covenant include George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* [1974]; Leon Morris, *New Testament Theology* [1990]; and Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* [1981]. I. Howard Marshall's recent and masterly *Theology of the New Testament* follows this tendency. The statement in a footnote that "The old covenant–new covenant distinction is not at all that prominent on the surface of the New Testament, but it seems to underlie Christian thinking on the understanding of the progress of salvation history" appears to be the extent of his analysis of the issue (I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses One Gospel* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004] 719, n. 10). Robert W. Yarbrough documents the current negative assessment toward salvation-his-

tory in Biblical studies in general and within Pauline studies in particular in "Paul and Salvation History," in D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid, eds., *Justification and Variegated Nomism: A Fresh Appraisal of Paul and Second Temple Judaism*, vol. 2: *The Paradoxes of Paul* (Grand Rapids/Tuebingen: Baker/Mohr-Siebeck, 2004) 297-342. Increasingly there are calls within and outside of evangelicalism to give greater attention to the *one biblical theology*. See Frank J. Matera, "New Testament Theology: History, Method, and Identity," *CBQ* 67 [2005]: 1-21 and William J. Dumbrell, "Paul and Salvation History in Romans 9:30-10:4," *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*, eds. Craig Bartholomew et al. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004]: 286-312.

ultimate guarantor against any idiosyncratic, “private interpretations” (see 2 Pet 1:20-21). Yet both also rise above the individual exegete’s narrowed context in time and augment facile claims that the Holy Spirit’s illumination enables total objectivity for the interpreter.⁵ The first test was garnered by the apostles themselves to justify their interpretations of Jesus Christ and centers on the Great Story the Holy Spirit reveals in all of Scripture. Unlike many moderns, the apostles clearly understood that while Jesus was the center of the Christian Story, he was not its beginning. They freely drew upon the powerful currents and trajectories of the Great Story coming out of the OT for their witness to Jesus. “Like it or not,” as one scholar reminds us, “prediction was the way the New Testament writers themselves related the testaments...”⁶ “As it is written” and “according to the Scriptures” are just two of the many ways the apostles expressed their dependency on the prior revelation of the OT for interpreting God’s work in Jesus of Galilee.

For the interpreter this movement of the Spirit in all of Scripture means that the exegetical task must ultimately move to the theological level of the biblical tradition. Excellent exegesis of texts means that we not only locate meaning in the context of the work or even testament in which they immediately appear. It means that we press further and locate meaning

against the unfolding kingdom and salvation-historical plan of God—the Great Story of all of the divine revelation. For it is at this level that Scripture’s deepest hermeneutical currents flow. It is here where Scripture’s distinct emphases and major themes and sanctioned trajectories test the role of every text in Scripture’s mosaic. It means among other things that we pay special attention to the thematic threads that begin in Gen 1-11, continue throughout Scripture, and uniquely tie off in Rev 21-22. It means that we listen to the text at the compositional level of its literary structure—we ask what the inspired author tells us from the way he structures his narratives, the manner in which he selects, omits, and repeats his ideas or words, etc. It means that we note the towering heroes of the entire biblical tradition and the reason for their honor—for example, why is Abraham the believer’s father and not Moses? Above all it means that in our national theology we always have an eye to the epochal progression that Scripture takes us through in the self-revelation of the Triune God and the corresponding advance in humanity’s relationship to Him moving out of the tutorial of an old covenant and into the maturity of the new covenant.⁷

The second means to test our national theology also depends on the unique constraints inherent to the new age of the Spirit and has to do with the nature of His presence in a

⁵ As, for example, in a recent evangelical book on hermeneutics by Robert L. Thomas (*Evangelical Hermeneutics: The New Versus the Old* [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002], 52).

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, “Hermeneutics,” in *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, II, (Englewood Cliffs,

NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 615 § 51, cited by Walter C. Kaiser, “The Eschatological Hermeneutics of ‘Evangicalism’: Promise Theology,” *JETS* 13:2 (1970), 91.

⁷ Jens Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004).

new temple, the heart of every believer. God's promise in the new covenant for a new measure of the Spirit within His people means simply that it is short-sighted and even reckless to be closed to His voice in others. This is not to say that we grant that the Spirit-led reflections of subsequent generations are of the same nature as the Spirit's ministry in the apostles who first bore witness to Jesus Christ, but this is why Christian theology has always been a communal and never an individual affair.⁸ With every passing year that community of voices outside of our own context becomes more numerous and more diverse, and a humble dialogue with these other voices, past and present, has even more chance to challenge the excesses and omissions driven by the historical confinement of our exegesis. Western evangelicals like never before seem to be particularly keen to amend their neglect of these voices from the church's ancient past. This is a good thing, provided that these voices also answer to the same tests of the biblical tradition as we are hoping

they will supply for us. All need the mirror of Scripture set before them, those earliest on the scene after the apostles included.⁹

Baptism: A Test Case for National Theology

Having briefly mapped out an exegetical course in the Bible's salvation-history of the evangelium together with a discerning openness to other Christian voices, it is time to proceed to application. The question of the meaning of baptism is a particularly good candidate for such a project, as its origin in the biblical tradition is undisputed and it is already receiving some attention as a case for national theology. Specifically it is proposed that evangelicals in Asian or Eurasian regions should be who they are on this point. They are Eastern and hence they can embrace the historically Eastern approaches and intellectual categories for the meaning of this rite. Such a mentality implicitly guides much of evangelical current practice in these regions anyway. This proposal means the liberation of Eur-

⁸ David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 257; Zimmermann, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics*, 285-306). Categories of truth such as "inspired" and "infallible" which evangelicals see as applicable to the Spirit's unique ministry upon the apostles are equally applied in the historical churches to Holy Church Tradition. The communal nature of theology is highlighted by many evangelicals in their dialogue with postmodernity, but they also risk losing the theological task in the elevation of historically contextualized communities over Scripture (Stanley Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001]; Curtis W. Freeman, "Toward a *Sensu Fidelium* for an Evangelical Church," in *The Nature of Confession: Evangelicals & Postliberals in Conversation*,

ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996]: 168-179).

⁹ This is a possible criticism raised in the current endeavors by evangelicals to reclaim the ethos of patristic Christianity for the contemporary evangelical church. Claims for the urgency of this task or its necessity unduly overstate the universality of this ancient tradition vis-a-vis the biblical one. In a recent evangelical work of this nature D. H. Williams, for example, approves of "privileging the earliest stages of tradition (apostolic and patristic) over all later forms" and further claims that "if contemporary evangelicalism aims to be doctrinally orthodox and exegetically faithful to Scripture, it cannot do without recourse to and integration of the foundational tradition of the early church" (*Evangelicals and Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005], 51 and 18 respectively).

asian evangelical teaching on baptism from an alien rationalistic tradition and seeing it within the more mystical, sacramental tradition historically characteristic of the Orthodox Church. Baptism, therefore, should be seen as the completion of the conversion process and the proper point at which the benefits of salvation are applied to the believer.

In accord with the hermeneutical paradigms advocated earlier, I want to offer three avenues for exegeting the meaning of baptism in the biblical tradition which will in theory clarify the limits of a national theology that is *evangelical* on this question. How successfully I have applied my own criteria to the context in which I write I leave for the reader to judge. The three avenues of inquiry here are:

1) study what Scripture says directly about baptism;

2) study Scripture's theological and salvation-historical concepts that relate to baptism;

3) study how the church's history itself might demonstrate the consequences of one or the other viewpoint on this doctrine. As you will see, I believe that the results in each of the three areas suggest that neither the *evangelium* nor the church's history warrant a claim for saving benefits from performance of a ritual. Baptism even in the presence of faith does not mark the moment of salvation, regeneration, or reception of the Holy Spirit. However, there is more there than an empty symbol. Further, I hope to show that the biblical and historical data open up different avenues of exploration for national theology that will be useful for both Eastern and Western evangelicalism.

1. Exegetical Considerations

When we consider now what the biblical tradition says explicitly about baptism we inevitably grapple with the list of texts that appear to powerfully connect water baptism to the effects of salvation. We may begin with the seeming clear affirmation of 1 Pet 3:21 that baptism "saves," to which we could adduce Rom 6:3-5 where baptism appears to unite the believer to Christ's death and resurrection: "...all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death... we have been buried with him through baptism into death... if we have become united with Him in the likeness of his death, certainly we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection." Beyond these there is 1 Cor 12:13 where it seems that one enters into the body of Christ by the means of baptism: "for by one baptism we were all baptized into one body," and several other texts that say baptism washes away sins (Acts 22:16: "arise and be baptized and wash away your sins"; cf. also Acts 2:38); that baptism regenerates us (John 3:5: "born of water and the Spirit"; Titus 3:5: "he saved us...by the washing of regeneration"), and that baptism clothes us with Christ (Gal 3:27: "for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ").

If the Scripture's presentation stopped there, indeed there would be no need to go further. Baptism is necessary for salvation. Simple. But Scripture does not stop with these passages. There are several other aspects to Scripture's portrayal of baptism that must hold us back from the

easy conclusion that baptism saves. To begin, some of the force for the claim for baptism as necessary for salvation is reduced by better interpretation of some of the above cited texts. For example, that the phrase “water and Spirit” in John 3:5 is a reference to water baptism is highly unlikely in view of the Lord’s rebuke of Nicodemus, a “teacher of Israel” that follows in verse 10. That a teacher of Israel does not understand being born of water and Spirit should immediately send us to the OT, Israel’s textbook, for our answer. There we find places like Ezek 36:25-27 where both spiritual cleansing, illustrated by water, and renewal are two aspects of the Spirit’s one regenerating work. In this context Ezekiel can have no understanding of the later NT rite of water baptism. Even if he was thinking about baptism, he surely was not a Baptist—“I will *sprinkle* clean water on you” (v. 27).¹⁰ Similarly, it is not a very well-founded assumption that 1 Cor 12:13 is a reference to water baptism and not baptism with the Spirit, which is the gift and promise of the first two chapters of Acts that constitute the essence of the new covenant identity of the church.¹¹ As I will try to show below, the evidence seems to point to the conclusion that one enters the new covenant by faith alone and not by means of baptism.

These two passages notwithstanding, there still are sufficient texts left in the list to warrant clarification. To begin this analysis it is important to take note of a certain “chain of salvation” in the apostles’ preaching and practice. “Repent, believe, and be baptized” was the decision called for in gospel preaching. In this chain baptism was obviously not taken lightly and the early Christians certainly knew nothing of an unbaptized believer. But this is not to say that salvation is not present until the chain has been completed in water baptism. Why? Part of the answer comes from the early church’s practice of the chain of salvation. Specifically, in the early church the three links of the chain were very tightly related to one another in time. Baptism was administered immediately after profession of faith—no waiting. Like the Ethiopian eunuch all NT believers could immediately exclaim, “Look! Water! What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36). In such a context, it is understandable why the NT writers do not always differentiate the different links of the chain as to their efficacy. The conversion-to-public profession process took place quickly and functioned as a whole. Under such circumstances mention of any one or combination of the links would easily call to mind the function of the whole chain.

¹⁰ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991). Even in the possibility of reference to John’s baptism as the actualization of Ezek 36, as Beasley-Murray suggests, there is no evidence that John’s baptism was anything but an outward sign of heart disposition like other ritual washings in the OT (G. R. Beasley-Murray, *John* WBC [Dallas: Word, 1987], 48-49). See further note 12 below.

¹¹ The new covenant advent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, which in the early chapters of Acts is referred to as the coming of the “gift” (2:38; cf. 11:17), “promise” (2:33, 39), and “baptism” (1:5; cf. 11:16) of the Spirit, formed the NT church. Baptism in the Spirit in 1 Cor 12:13 is a reference to the believer’s reception of the gift of the Spirit, not the rite of baptism, as argued by Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 604 ff.

In Acts 2:38, for example, only repentance and baptism are mentioned; in Mark 16:16, belief and baptism; in Acts 20:21 it is repentance and faith; in Rom 2:4 it is just repentance; and in Acts 22:16 it is baptism and faith. Thus, we need to understand that the quick administration of baptism in the apostolic church was the historical stage for the NT's presentation of baptism, including its texts that appear to give baptism any saving power.

Despite their sometimes holistic expression because of their practice, the disciples' teaching seems to make it clear that the saving power of the chain lay with faith, not baptism. First, the universal call to faith, where repentance and belief are the negative and positive aspects of the spiritual conversion process, affirms the power of faith alone to save. While all views see saving faith as central to any effect in baptism, the sheer disproportion of faith to baptism texts in this regard appears to point us to how much effect the ritual itself should bear. There is an asymmetrical relationship between faith and baptism in the way Scripture talks about efficacious work in salvation. In the handful of verses where baptism seems to work, faith is always present in the context, but the reverse is not true for the more than 150 texts where faith alone saves with no mention of baptism. The conclusion appears to be, then, that while baptism needs faith to work, faith does not in the same way need baptism to work. The asymmetrical relationship between the two is also to be noted when in the function of the chain of salvation "whoever believes and is baptized will

be saved" (Mark 16:16), but nowhere does Scripture ever say, "Whoever is not *baptized* will be condemned." Instead it is only a failure to believe that condemns as verse 16 continues, "...but he who has *disbelieved* shall be condemned." Jesus himself emphatically states such is the case only with belief: "whoever does not *believe* has already been condemned" (John 3:18).

Second, the same asymmetrical priority of faith to baptism can be detected in other ways in the earliest Christian sermons and writings. For example, it is odd that baptism does not appear more consistently in the apostles' preaching if baptism is necessary like faith for salvation. Certainly baptism is part of Jesus' great commission (Matt 28:19-20), but Jesus' own preaching was only "repent and believe"—no mention of baptism, not even John's (Mark 1:15), and the evangelists' summaries of Jesus' preaching likewise only mention repentance and belief (e.g., Matt 4:17). Paul summarizes his ministry to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 without a word about baptism, but as only proclaiming "repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). This parallels the account of his commissioning he gives later in Acts 26:18 where he is to be sent to minister and witness "to those who have been sanctified by faith in [Christ]"—again no mention of baptism. True, Peter's first sermon in Acts 2 mentions baptism, but what about the second sermon in Acts 3:16-19 where the call is only for repentance and belief? How could he make such an important omission if baptism is truly the moment of salvation, the reception of the

Spirit, cleansing and the new birth?

The same question could be asked of the apostle John who claims that he wrote his gospel with the purpose that people could believe and be saved (John 20:31). However, throughout his account the only condition ever required for salvation is belief (e.g., John 3:16, 18:36). If more is, in fact, necessary it seems the apostle has seriously misled his readers and failed his purpose.

But perhaps not mentioning baptism in summaries and sermons of the early church is just more evidence of the holistic function of the chain of salvation? Perhaps the disciples' consistent mention of belief was just shorthand for the whole chain of salvation that includes baptism? To this possibility, however, Scripture also says, No. Other texts that specifically treat baptism and faith seem to indicate that baptism is the obedient response of an already saved person.

We can begin with the accounts of Paul's conversion, since his writings are often taken as evidence that baptism saves. In the two detailed accounts Scripture gives us, one narrated by Luke (Acts 9) and the other by Paul (Acts 22), several things indicate that Paul was already a believer and therefore saved before Ananias' call for him to "be baptized for the wash-

ing away of his sins" (Acts 22:16). First, Ananias is not sent to Paul to evangelize or to baptize him, but to heal his sight (Acts 9:12, 17). Paul's relationship to the risen Lord is already established because of what took place on the Damascus road. Second, Ananias addresses him as "brother," which in the context of the revelation he received about Paul's commission was likely a reference to the common address within the Christian community (Eph 6:23; Rom 8:29). Third, Paul is filled with the Spirit prior to his baptism (9:17, 18), indicating that his baptism was an outward symbol of what had already taken place inwardly. Finally, baptism as an evidence of the spiritual reality parallels the ritual use of water in the OT and Judaism, which would no doubt inform the earliest church's understanding. Although baptism per se is not in the OT, the efficacy of the ritual use of water in Judaism was always located in the subject's prior experience or inner disposition. Water in Jewish washings was a sign of an earlier-accomplished reality.¹²

Peter's accounts of the salvation of the house of Cornelius run in a similar manner and probably should be seen as informing his meaning in his first sermon (Acts 2:38) and first epistle (1 Pet 3:21).¹³ In Acts 10:43 Peter's

¹² A. Oepke states this is true for the OT, the rabbinic literature and the writings of Qumran ("baptw." TDNT 1:536; Oscar S. Brooks, *The Drama of Decision* [Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1987], 109). Brooks extends this meaning to the use of water in the Jewish proselyte baptisms of the first century as well (*Drama of Decision*, 25-26).

¹³ The exegesis of these passages also appears to establish that baptism itself does not wash away sins or save. Grammarians note the possible use of the preposition *eij-* in Acts 2:38 (*eij-* *alfesin*

two amartwn umwn) as in other places (Rom 4:20; Matt 12:41, etc.) to indicate logical consequence, not cause. Baptism here is administered "with respect to forgiveness" or "because of forgiveness" not "in order to receive forgiveness" (H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* [Toronto: Macmillan, 1955], 104; A. Oepke, "*eij-*," TDNT, 2:427-428). In 1 Pet 3:21 the following observations clarify the "salvific" sense of baptism Peter intends: (1) there is the explicit denial that baptism means anything for cleansing sin ("not the removal of

message to Cornelius was that faith alone brings forgiveness. Two verses later Cornelius receives the Holy Spirit, the mark of salvation, and then still later in v. 48 he is baptized, making it clear that salvation and the Spirit do not come from baptism. The next chapter has Peter back in Jerusalem recounting what took place and again he makes the point that Cornelius received the Spirit and cleansing and “life” after believing (Acts 11:17.18). There is nothing about baptism. Later at the Jerusalem council of Acts 15, Peter gives the same testimony that the Gentiles’ hearts were cleansed and they received the Spirit by faith (Acts 15:8-9). In all three accounts life, spiritual cleansing, and the Spirit are associated only with living faith; baptism is either not mentioned at all or explicitly said to have come subsequent to salvation. This is all very strange if baptism is the real moment of salvation.

Lest we think Cornelius’ experience is some kind of dispensational exception, a mere description and not a prescription for doctrinal norms, Paul’s ministry at Corinth helps us to see that such is not the case. The account he gives in the first letter makes certain his own view that faith alone makes one saved and that baptism is an outward expression of the saved state. We notice first how he tactfully separates baptism from salvation saying that he had come with a message for their salvation (1 Cor

1:21) but that he did not come to baptize (1 Cor 1:17). As commentator Gordon Fee notes, “it seems clear from this passage that Paul does not understand baptism to *effect* salvation. The preaching of the cross does that... For [Paul] baptism comes *after* the hearing of the gospel, but it does so as the God-ordained mode of faith’s response to the gospel.”¹⁴ Second, we notice that as his message had effect and people were saved he could justifiably think of himself as the Corinthians’ spiritual father (1 Cor 9:2; 4:15), yet he was not the one who baptized them. In fact, he expressly states that he did not baptize but a few of them (1:14). If baptism was the moment of salvation, should it not be the moment counted for spiritual fathering? Yet Paul clearly denies spiritual fathering to the one who administers baptism. He is their father and he did not baptize them.

The apostle’s own account of his conversion, commission, ministry and teaching should caution anyone who would see his writings as supportive of baptism as a necessary condition for salvation.

2. Theological Considerations

Beyond Scripture’s direct teaching about baptism, the claim that baptism is a necessary condition for salvation is problematic in light of other clear biblical teaching. The doctrines of faith, grace, works, and the sufficien-

dirt from the flesh”); (2) the parallel to baptism in the waters of the flood for Noah (v. 20) is non-salvific. The flood waters did not save Noah. It was his passing through and escaping them that was their part in his salvation. (3) In the immediate and far context the cause or agent of salvation is our union with Christ’s resurrection (v. 21; 1:3

through the mediation of the living word (“born again...through the living and abiding word of God” [1:23]) (Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990], 144-145; J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter* WBC [Dallas: Word, 1988], 213-218).

¹⁴ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 63-64.

cy of Christ's cross also reveal further what baptism is and what it is not.

2.1. *Confusing faith with faith's benefits.*

According to the *evangelium*, the only indispensable condition of salvation and all its benefits is faith in the final work of Jesus Christ. It is by faith alone that we are adopted into God's family. It is by faith alone that we are united to Christ and have his holiness and righteousness. It is by faith alone that we are forgiven of our sins, gain eternal life and the Holy Spirit. This was the teaching of Jesus (John 3:14-16.36; 6:35.40; 11:25.26) and his apostles (Acts 16:31; 1 John 5:1). Throughout his letters the apostle Paul is categorically opposed to the possibility that any human activity could add to Christ's work. It is not Jesus plus something that saves. It is Jesus alone and faith in His cross alone. In the Galatian churches the attempt was to add the rituals of the Law, such as circumcision: "You need to have Jesus plus the rituals of the Law." Paul characterized this as a "different gospel" and contested it with all his might (see Gal 5:2.4). Thus, it is only by means of faith alone that Jesus' sacrifice shines as the one act which ultimately provides us with the complete benefits of salvation.

Yet living faith will also produce its fruit in subsequent acts of obedience. The heart of the gospel call is to deny oneself and take up the lordship of Jesus (Luke 9:23). This call on the believer's life extends to every claim Jesus makes on His followers including loving and forgiving others (John 13:34; Matt 18:35). Here is the point at which baptism also enters the

believer's relationship to his Lord. Namely, one can no more pretend to be a follower of Christ and reject his invitation to baptism any more than one can reject the Lord's call to forgive or His command to love. Like love and forgiveness, receiving baptism demonstrates the presence of a new born heart. It is an expression of obedience and submission to Jesus' lordship that obtains from an already saved person. However, as we noted in the preceding paragraph, the *evangelium* forbids us to confuse our acts of love or forgiveness or our participation in baptism with that faith which gave us Christ in the first place. We are not accepted by God, declared righteous, or placed in Christ on the basis of our works of love or forgiveness. Similarly, we cannot allow the performance of any ritual to join faith as an equal condition of salvation. Otherwise salvation is not of grace but of works (Eph 2:8-10). The nature of the gospel itself then shows us the efficacy of the different links of the "chain of salvation." The spiritual transaction of passing from death to life takes place with repentance and belief. Spiritual conversion is expressed publicly in the rite of baptism, but technically that act of obedience does not mark the point at which one is born again. Baptism was the act of an already reborn person.

As we noted earlier, in the early church the believer did not go very long without a public demonstration of faith in baptism. Faith was not significantly separated from baptism and the links of the chain functioned more holistically in the biblical expressions. But in the case of most Protestant and evangelical denominations today, along with Catholics and Orthodox,

baptism is significantly separated from belief (until Easter or Pentecost in the earliest traditions), and in this context the reason to specify salvation from faith alone becomes more acute. When churches proclaim that a “believer” has not been born again, has not received the Holy Spirit, has not received forgiveness of sins until the moment of baptism, even though he “believed” months earlier, then they have said something negative about the saving power of faith and belief. They have said that simple belief does not gain us anything until it is expressed in baptism. They have said that Saul was not converted on the Damascus road, but three days later in the waters of Antioch. And they have said that our neighbor who in brokenness surrendered his life to Christ one night alone in his room really did not get Christ, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit, or a new heart, and would have eternally perished had he died before he experienced water baptism in a church six or nine months later. If this is so, then the NT’s position that baptism is dependent upon faith appears to be subtly subverted to the opposite—that faith is dependent upon baptism.

2.2. Giving Life or Strengthening Life?

Within the artificial circumstances of separating baptism from the faith it demonstrates it is natural to suppose that our only options regarding the significance of baptism are two: either baptism with faith gives salvation and life, or baptism is an empty symbol. However, Scripture would appear to say there is more. As

we have seen, the first option, while claiming to defend the priority of faith at the same time subtly diverts efficacious focus elsewhere. But that does not mean that in baptism we are left with only the performance of an empty symbol. When baptism itself is given its proper role as a result of salvation, not the cause of it, awkward statements vis-a-vis faith are avoided and baptism finds its proper place and benefit for the Christian.

When we submit to the lordship of Christ and pass from death to life by faith our subsequent works of obedience (or better, Christ’s works through us—Gal 2:20; 1 Cor 15:10) strengthen and deepen that life. This is why James calls us to be doers and not only hearers of the Word. Practicing what we believe helps us not to be like the one who has looked at himself in the mirror and having walked away forgets what he looks like (Jas 1:23-25). In order to stand firm and to grow in Christ we must constantly be renewing our minds with the truths of our new life in Christ (Rom 6:3-11), spending time with those who are likeminded (Heb 10:19-24), putting off the old man and putting on Christ (Eph 4:22-24), thinking on the heavenly (Col 3:1), and countless other acts of obedience, including the act of baptism.

Far from an empty symbol, baptism brings to us the effects of obedience on two relational planes. (1) The union with God by faith is demonstrated and thus strengthened in us. The personal assurance that one is accepted before God on the basis of outright forgiveness and not performance is deepened as the whole person rehearses and reenacts the drama of dying to the

world and rising to Christ (Rom 6:3-11). This is why we are immersed in water, because the drama and sensory experience of baptism addresses and affects part of our heart at a deeper level than the mind and cognition. Public actions have the psychological effect of deepening one's commitment to something. The more deeply one believes or is committed to the truths of the gospel that baptism portrays, the more fully God's gracious favor in forgiveness and union with the believer is experienced in life. Thus, as all acts of obedience, baptism is a means to a deeper working of God's grace in us. The more deeply we believe, the more deeply God's response of grace to us is received with all its attending effects of joy, peace, and love. (2) In baptism the commitment to a local body of believers is publicly announced and affirmed. There is an acknowledgement of commitment to one another for worship of God and fulfillment of the church's mission together. Before our conversion in various ways we were identified with the world or another religious system; in baptism we publicly break those former associations and identify ourselves anew as a disciple of Jesus Christ and member of His church.

Therefore baptism, like all acts of obedience, is significant to the believer's experience of salvation. But, one might ask, is this not a mysterious, sacramental understanding of baptism? In a certain sense it is—and within this sense I applaud the efforts of Eastern evangelicals to explore and express this powerful meaning of baptism. Further reflection in this area would do a wonderful service to the evangelical church everywhere.

But the kind of mystery we need to explore, it seems to me, is different from that which the Roman and Eastern Orthodox churches propose for baptism. There is a clear differentiation between rituals that create the saved, forgiven, adopted state for the believer (all who, together with Orthodox and Catholics, claim that baptism gives salvation) and the ritual that subsequently joins to, strengthens and deepens the forgiven, adopted, and saved state that was initiated by faith alone. One is a cause of salvation; the other is the result of it. One diffuses faith into its benefits; the other consolidates faith for the long obedience in the same direction that is the Christian life.

3. Moving to Maturity

A final theological observation concerns the general course of God's program of salvation that unfolds in the pages of Scripture. Although God's intention to redeem and restore his fallen creation appears very early in the Bible (Gen 3:15), the specific means of accomplishing the creation's redemption are progressively revealed throughout biblical history. The NT writers reveal the final summation of God's plan of redemption in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ (Eph 1:9-11). In their presentation of Christ as the quantitative sum of all of God's work, they also make clear the ways in which God's prior dealings with people were preparatory to the fullness of divine/human communion that is now in Christ. In other words, the inspired writers say that God's plan is moving to fulfillment not just quantitatively, but qualitatively. In the lat-

ter category, polarities of childhood to adulthood, bondage to freedom, shadow to reality, incompleteness/perfection to completion/perfection, letter to Spirit, old covenant to new, are NT expressions of the advance Christ means for the substance of our mature relationship with God (see Gal 3-4; 2 Cor 3-4; Heb 8-10; etc).

The maturation of the divine/human relationship was foretold by Israel's prophets and inaugurated in the new covenant in Jesus' blood (Luke 22:20) by enabling a new internalization of the divine will and source of power to fulfill it. After the cross of Christ, God's will is no longer written on stones outside the believer but written on the believer's own heart as the prophets foretold (Jer 31:34). The believer no longer struggles to comply with external demands but with greater measures of the Spirit's indwelling the new heart responds to the divine command with the pulsing life of God (Ezek 36:25-27). Thus, Roland de Vaux is justified to detect movement toward the new maturity beginning in Israel's prophets who "contributed to make the cult more interior and more spiritual; the cult was more and more considered as the outward expression of interior dispositions, and it was the inward spirit which gave it all its value. The way was thus prepared for the New Testament."¹⁵ When Jesus appears on the stage the concept of temple-purity is reformed as the ex-

ternally-oriented standards gave way to focus on the heart from which all human relationships flow. Defensive holiness that must protect itself from defilement from outside in the new age shifts to the inner spiritual condition of the heart: "there is nothing outside the man which going into him can defile him, but the things that proceed out of the man are what defile him," as Jesus says (Mark 7:15). Under the old economy, particular and detailed physical rituals mediated the relationship with God; in the new all is subsumed under one transcultural and universal command to love. The veil was rent that delineated the distance that defiled creation had to maintain before the God who would be treated as holy (Lev 10:3). Now face-to-face fellowship is accomplished by the One who sits at the right hand and makes way for His people to address God directly as "my Father" (Jer 3:16. 19; cf. Heb 4:14-16; 10:19-22).¹⁶ In short, the mature relationship found in the new covenant is an advance away from outward, mediating rites in the divine/human relationship.

An argument toward such a progression can also be made under the *recapitulatio* that traces throughout Scripture where the creation's final destiny is the fulfillment of the divine patterns set down in the Garden of Eden. After Gen 3 all of salvation history is moving to the Second Adam's resolution of the bloody struggle with

¹⁵ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997 rpt of 1961 Eng. ed.), 456.

¹⁶ This is Paul's teaching with the analogy of Moses for believer in 2 Cor 3:12-18. Because of his face-to-face fellowship with the Lord, Moses' face shone with glory (Exod 33:11-13; Deut 34:10). Paul says that now Moses' experience is

spread to all who in Christ behold with unveiled face the glory of the Lord (2 Cor 3:18; 4:6, "...the glory of God in the face of Christ"), "and to that extent 'every Christian has become a Moses'..." (Ralph P. Martin, 2 Corinthians WBC [Dallas: Word, 1986], 71; cf. E. Lohse, "προσῶπον," TDNT, 6:776).

God's adversary and the redemption of the creation to its unspoiled state. This is most clear from the way the end of history in Revelation ties off themes that command the landscape of the early chapters of Genesis, including those that concern the nature of the divine/human relationship. As in Eden, there is no more temple (Rev 21:22) mediating between God and man.¹⁷ As in Eden, there is the fullness of communion between God and all humanity; all see His face (Rev 22:4, cf. Gen 3:8). God's actual dwelling is with the creation as the covenant formula is at last fulfilled—God has a people and He is their God (Rev 21:4). If we add a Pauline motif to this, in the final state as there was in Eden there is a (Second) Adam present as the Head of all humanity, who are fully conformed to His image.

Such re-presentations of the Edenic condition allow us to trace a clear trajectory of restoration upon which we may also locate our own position in the already/not yet of the new covenant. The glance backward to the fully human fellowship of Eden, as well as the one forward to the fully human fellowship with God that will be, show that the road ahead is away from the externally-oriented, mediating ritu-

als of the old covenant relationship. This is not to say that there is no physicality to our relationship with God; the new creation is not ethereal, but it is not scripted and mediated as to locality or time as it was in Israel. The paucity of attention to specific worship forms in the NT itself should also be interpreted in light of this trajectory. Not a deficiency calling for shoring up under later Holy Church Tradition, the lack of attention to such things in the NT tells us of a new movement to maturity taking place.¹⁸ The How of our relationship with God is being swallowed up in its new What.

Similarly, Jesus Christ the Second Adam, who is the new proto-type for human spirituality, likewise foretold and prepared for the passing of the old dispensation's mediated encounter with God. He taught us to address God as "my Father" as the prophet foretold (Jer 3:19; cf. Matt 6:9ff.). He showed the internalized essence of the new covenant knowledge of God without the temple and without reference to divine mystery borne by intermediating physical objects (Heb 4:14-16; 10:19-22).¹⁹

It is the new covenant's shift away from the externality of ritual and mediation that makes associating the

¹⁷ See the fascinating study by Beale tracing the temple motif through Scripture where he argues that Moses presents Eden as a temple with Adam as a priest figure (G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004]).

¹⁸ This is the common argument by those seeking to justify the need of later Holy Church Tradition before the Scripture principle of evangelicalism. See for example, John Whiteford, "Sola Scriptura: In the Vanity of their Minds," at <www.pastornet.net.au/jmm/athe/athe0142.htm>, accessed September 9, 2003.

¹⁹ Of course the Incarnation itself is a sacramental of the divine presented by means of the physical which is why it remained a powerful motif for the spirit of the early post-apostolic church through to the iconoclast controversy (Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003], 1-24; 237-264). However, the Incarnate Lord's own pattern as *a human being in relationship with His Father* has none of the sacramentalistic overtones found in later Christianity. It was simple; it was face-to-face encounter. That the Incarnation's ontology occluded the view of its anthropology for the post-apostolic church has been noted by

spiritual blessings of salvation solely with an externally administered ritual counter to the momentum of the divine project of redemption. The meaning-center of baptism as a new covenant rite should reflect not only the Scriptures' priority of the faith-response, but also the new covenant's priority of the spiritual, the internal, direct, and mature relationship with God that is restored in Christ. As we have seen above, baptism cannot by this be reduced to an empty symbol, but neither is it appropriate to make it bear the weight of marking the effective point of salvation.

3.3. *Historical Considerations*

The fusing of that which gives us eternal life with that which strengthens that life, together with the numbing effect on the new covenant in the process of "re-judaization" that took hold in the early post-apostolic church is the gospel's persistent claim against the historical Roman and Eastern churches. Though each expresses it differently, both of these churches see baptism as the moment of salvation and so their story is pertinent for all who would reflect on this question. As we shall see, powerful historical factors other than Scripture's clear teaching influenced the innovation of sacramentalism together with other innovations in the early church and therefore stand as a lesson of caution to all who follow

who might be tempted in this direction.

The view that baptism is the moment of salvation has a long history in the church, both East and West. In the late second century, in the only extant treatise on baptism from that time, Tertullian identified the four gifts of baptism as remission of sins, deliverance from death, regeneration, and the bestowal of the Holy Spirit. However, as church historian Jaroslav Pelikan reminds us, Tertullian's sacramentalism regarding baptism did not come so much from the canonical Christian texts as much as from post-apostolic Christian practice and teaching.²⁰ That practice and teaching was heavily influenced by what Pelikan calls a "re-judaizing" or a return to the old covenant in Christian practice and thinking.²¹ Four forces are usually cited as pushing the church in this direction and dimming the bright beacon of grace represented in the new covenant.

First, the earliest teachers and predominant membership of the early church were Jewish. This situation extended well into the second century before Gentile numbers in the church overtook and surpassed the Jewish ones.²² The significance in this observation for "re-judaization" is apparent from the canonical documents themselves where the Jewish Christians attempt to "judaize" Paul's Gospel and tripped up even Peter (Gal 2:14). The dawn of the new age of the new covenant meant a radical shift in

patristic scholars. The true humanity of Christ was undervalued in the early church's synthesis (H. E. W. Turner, *The Pattern of Christian Truth* [London: A. R. Mowbray, 1954], 489-492).

²⁰ Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 162.

²¹ Pelikan, *Emergence of the Catholic Tradition*, 26; cf. also J. L. Neve, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1: *History of Christian Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1946), 41.

²² Oskar Skarsaune, *In the Shadow of the Temple: Jewish Influences on Early Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002), 181, 223.

thinking for these first Jewish converts who needed to decide why Jesus meant Judaism was beyond reform. It had to be abandoned. As we shall see later, Paul's answer to Peter in Antioch (Gal 2:11ff.) far from ended the doubts in this area for Jews who had accepted Jesus as Messiah.

Second, while the NT canon was still forming the OT remained the Holy Scriptures of the Christian churches, read at every gathering. The stock of the Jewish sacred texts rose further for the orthodox by the attacks its prestige suffered at the hands of pagans and heretics at this time. Pagan philosophers challenged the OT narratives as mere myth (see Origen's *Contra Celsus*) and heretics called it the story of another alien god (Marcion) or an evil one (Gnostics). Different answers were brought out to meet these attacks, but all raised the visibility of the OT and its theology for the early church.

Third, the demise of the nation of Israel in the early years of the church's history (the events of 70 and 135 AD) stimulated the novel view that the Christian church took the

role of new Israel in God's plan for history.²³ Such nomenclature appears first in the already Gentile-dominated church of the mid second century (Justin) and causes the church to see herself everywhere in the OT. OT institutions, forms, and theology are Christianized through allegory and typology and enter newly minted into the church's life and practice. Sacrificial language enters the Christian parlance for the Lord's Supper at this time. "Priest" begins to be used as a title for Christian leaders. The trappings of institutionalized religion return as the New Israel looked to the Old Israel's patterns of temple-worship. Christian liturgies develop with the same provision for ritual and priestly decorum for approaching God that were stipulated for Old Israel's worship in the temple.²⁴ Contrary to the internalized, mature communion of the new covenant, mediating institutions begin to develop in the cult of the martyrs and veneration of Mary. God is present with His people, but as in the OT He still remains only mysterious and holy; His people still require physical signs to show His presence and shelter

²³ Ray Pritz, "Replacing the Jews in Early Christian Theology," *Mishkan* 21 (1994), 21-26; Jeffrey Siker, *Disinheriting the Jews* (Louisville: Westminster, 1991), 28-76 (cited by Pritz "Replacing the Jews," 21); and Skarsaune who details the nature of the subtle shift away from Paul taking place in the early church: "Whereas in Paul the Gentiles are added to the true Israel of Jewish believers to share in their inheritance, in Justin it is the other way around: the few Jewish believers are added to the church of the Gentiles to share in their inheritance. This shift of perspective had far-reaching consequences. While in Paul the Gentiles share in the promises given to true Israel, in Justin the promises are transferred from the Jewish people to the church of the Gentiles. This church replaces the Jewish people. It takes over the inheritance of Israel while at the

same time disinheriting the Jews" (*Shadow of the Temple*, 267-68).

²⁴ On the development of sacrificial motifs and sacramentalism in the early church, see for example, R. A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Everett Ferguson, "Sacrifice," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2:1015-18. Catholic scholar Herbert Haag lists three historical factors that promoted the later development of liturgical worship: (1) Early prominence of epistles like 1 Clement; (2) the "re-evaluation" of the OT following the controversy with Marcion; and (3) the charge from the Roman state that Christianity was a religion without a liturgy (Herbert Haag, *Da Gesù al Sacerdozio* [Turin: Claudiana, 2001], 89-106; cited by Ronald E. Diprose, *The Theology of the New Covenant*, unpublished monograph, 2005, ch.1.12).

them from His awesome holiness.

Fourth, the problems that Jewish Christians like Peter (and James) had with Paul's non-Jewish gospel in the first century continued into the second century. Scholars have long noted the lack of exposition or even mention of Paul's letters in the extant writings of the early post-apostolic church. In the words of one historian, it's almost as if Paul was "intentionally shoved aside" by the orthodox church of this time.²⁷ This situation may of course be just another accident of history—all of the writings of this time obviously have not survived to us, but Irenaeus' stated intention to rescue the apostle from the heretics and to exposit his works rightly (*Against Heresies*, 4.41.3-4) gives support to the consensus view. As we saw above, Paul was hard to digest for the faithful Jewish Christians, but he also suffered as the darling of heretics. For Marcion Paul was the only true apostle (Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 3.13), and Gnostics loved to twist his anthropological terms (carnal, spiritual, natural people) to portend their Gnostic superiority over the unenlightened carnal orthodox Christians. Further, they experienced their salvation as a gift of grace that freed them from this world to a new life, which among students of Gnosticism has brought forth the

ironic observation that "[Gnostics] understood Paul better than most of their fellow Christians..."²⁶

Deprived of Paul the church lost of one of its most effective counters to the re-judaizing tendencies of their historical context. Having the advantage of Christ's finished work in the Cross, Resurrection, and Ascension behind him, Paul is the instrument God uses more than any other New Testament writer to unleash the beacon of grace from the fetters of mere religion. For him, the unilateral demonstration of divine love in the Cross is all-sufficient for communion with the Abba Father. The new covenant's promise of a new spiritual power to realize and sustain communion of God with his people is without blemish. Paul is the apostle of the Spirit. His exposition of God's justifying righteousness in Christ was the antidote for any return to the spiritual childhood of the prior covenant. Thus, it should be taken as no mere coincidence in this regard that the eminent Pauline scholar, N. T. Wright, should note the dimming of grace inherent to sacramentalism when he writes, "where confidence before God is founded upon Christ's work alone, there is no need for sacramentals, devotion to Mary, rote prayers, and sacramentalism in general."²⁷

²⁵ Wilhelm Schneemelcher, "Paulus in der griechischen Kirche des zweiten Jahrhunderts," *ZKG* 75 [1964], 9; see further, J. Roetzel, "Paul in the Second Century," in *The Cambridge Companion to St. Paul*, ed. James D. G. Dunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 228-235.

²⁶ This is because the Gnostics' fellow Christians "tended to express salvation in the ethical categories of merit and reward" (R. van den Broek, "The Present State of Gnostic Studies," *VG* 37 [1983], 70-71).

²⁷ Tom Wright, "Justification: The Biblical Ba-

sis and Its Relevance for Contemporary Evangelicalism," in *The Great Acquittal: Justification by Faith and Current Christian Thought*, ed. G. Reid (London: Collins, 1982), 31-32. Regarding the significant weakening of Pauline themes in the Fathers, see Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1965), 68-69.

²⁸ See Mark Saucy, "Between Da Vinci and Rome: The New Covenant as a Theological Norm in Early Christianity," *TrinJ* 27 NS (2006), 1-27.

Wright's conclusions about sacramentalism in general find corroboration in others who have studied the theology of the early post-apostolic church. The lack of Paul, the vision of the new Israel, and the need to salvage the status of the OT all tended to shape the new covenant in the molds of the old covenant for the practice and teaching of the church at this time.²⁸ One study on the doctrine of grace in the Apostolic Fathers summarizes the adverse affects for the gospel going on at this time in four areas.

1. *A dimming of faith.* Instead of faith as the sole means of receiving God's salvation and Jesus' sacrifice alone as the one act which ultimately provides us with the complete benefits of salvation, faith's benefits were diffused into various "holy" ceremonies, objects, times and people. Rival powers (physical, magical) invaded the picture and crowded out faith as the central dynamic of the Christian life.

2. *A dimming of the cross.* Instead of the Cross being that which alone puts people right with God, ceremonialism crept in and added to Christ's work. The Cross devolved to a kind of the first installment which set man on his feet again so he can carry out the rest of his obligations to God through the proper observance of the sacraments.

3. *A dimming of grace.* Instead of grace as the self-giving of God in the event of Christ and the new possibility to be united to Him by faith, i.e., united into a 'state of

grace,' grace became the help God gave the Christian for the spiritual journey. Grace became merely an addition to the energies of the believer in making himself righteous. It was a reward of the choice people make to do good works.

4. *A dimming of justification.* Instead of understanding justification as a past event (our faith in the sufficiency of the cross of Christ), it became something only future. It needed to be perfected as a result of faith and sacramental works of love. It was something that was attained through human work, not what is declared by God on the basis of Jesus' death.²⁹

The rise of the sacramental view of baptism parallels the rise of sacramentalism in general and shares the dimming of these crucial areas of the new covenant relationship that went on in the earliest post-apostolic church. In his seminal study of baptism in the patristic church, G. Lampe notes for baptism much of what Torrance concluded in the four points above.

...in the post-apostolic writers there is a tendency for the grandeur of the NT theory of Baptism to begin to fade; it ceases in some degree to find its focus and center in the saving work of Christ, and the spiritual gifts bestowed in it begin to be thought of in isolation from the focal point of the Atonement, in which they ought to co-inhere. In particular, the seal of the Spirit, received in Baptism, begins to be conceived in quasi-magical terms as a mark impressed upon the soul by the due performance of the baptismal ceremonial, a stamp whose purpose is to safeguard the recipient from

²⁹ T. F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1948).

the hostile powers of the Devil, and preserve him in soul and body unharmed for the enjoyment of immortality.³⁰

While there would be little use in predicating all of Lampe's or Torrance's conclusions to the dogmas of the current historical Roman and Orthodox churches, they do indicate some decline from NT patterns that continues in the ethos of these denominations. The continued paucity of faith-rhetoric and the dominating role of the Virgin Mary in Orthodox piety might serve as two examples.³¹ The history of current views, therefore, is instructive to those who follow after. Among other things, they indicate why the motifs, tendencies and trajectories in any one generation of the church's practice and application of the inspired apostolic witness and interpretation of Jesus cannot be held as the sacrosanct judge of all. The gospel of Jesus Christ, the new covenant of His blood, given to us in the apostolic tradition, always precedes, creates and judges the church.

The historical churches' sacramental fusing of that which justifies and that which sanctifies in the rite of baptism has always marked a critical distinction between these denominations and evangelicals of both East and West. Historically it

is preferable to see with the Radical Reformers of the sixteenth century that the question of baptism's meaning divides not along a cultural plane, but along a doctrinal one. As we noted already, sacramentalism started early and took both the Eastern and Western wings of the patristic church, but it was on the grounds of the Scripture principle, namely the authority of Scripture over tradition, that Anabaptists rejected it. For this reason Baptists of all geographic regions and times have never understood baptism in the sacramental sense of the Orthodox and Catholic churches. This includes Evangelical Christians and Baptists in Russia. One hundred years ago the creeds of believers in Russia also clearly affirmed their non-sacramental understanding of the efficacy of baptism. Consider what the following statements from the Prokhanov movement's Confession of Faith (1910) affirm about when one is born again and the meaning of baptism.

Человек усваивает спасение через веру, покаяние, обращение, и рождение свыше ...Одновременно с покаянием и обращением во внутренней природе человека происходит – рождение свыше³² ...Крещение водою есть внешний знак совершив-

³⁰ G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit* (London: SPCK, 1967), 150.

³¹ Miroslav Volf (*After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998], 168-171). John of Damascus' seminal expression of Eastern Orthodoxy in *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* has no reference at all to justification by faith. Bulgakov locates the role of Mary for Orthodox theology when he writes, "Love and veneration for the Virgin is the soul of Orthodox piety, its heart, that which warms and animates its entire body. A faith in Christ which

does not include His virgin birth and the veneration of His Mother is another faith, another Christianity from that of the Orthodox Church (Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church* [Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988], 116). However, as Kelley notes, for the first four centuries of the church there was little of Bulgakov's sentiment. There is little if any written evidence prior to this time that believers prayed to her or believed in her capacity to defend or help Christians (J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. [San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1989], 491).

шегося в душе ранее крещения Духом Святым или смерти для греха и воскресения для праведности... Поэтому крещение водою имеет свое значение только тогда, когда оно совершается над теми, кто сознательно уверовали во Христа, раскаялись, обратились, и получили рождение свыше, то есть кто получили крещение духовное...³³

In a same way the readers of the journal *Baptist* would read in 1908:

Ты спросишь для чего-же нужно верующему крещение? Неужели крещение омывает грехи? Нет, милый мой друг, водное крещение не омывает грехов, а оно нужно тем, которые уже омыты от грехов кровью Христа и спасены; оно нужно для детей Божьих, которые с радостью исполняют волю своего Отца.³⁴

Such also reflects the language of Article VIII (“On baptism”) of the 1906 Confession of Faith of the Christian-Baptists. There baptism is referred to as a «торжественное объявление», the «первый плод и любви ко Христу» of those who are already «обращены Евангелием....»³⁵ In all cases we note that Russian Baptists follow their Anabaptist forebears and see baptism as the physical

demonstration of an already saved person. There are none of the sacramental overtones of the traditional view of the Orthodox Church.

Conclusion: Are We Asking the Right Question?

In its source and substance evangelical national theology is bound by the canon of Scripture and the transcultural message of good news recorded therein. This is true regardless of whether a German, a Russian, or an American takes up the theological task. The *evangelium* is centered in the cross of Jesus Christ and its free offer of reconciled relationship with the Creator—a new covenant, to all who would believe. Faith as the central response demanded in the gospel is shared by all the voices in the Christian community. Yet as regards the question of baptism we have seen that the conclusion that baptism is a ritual necessity for salvation derives from insufficient attention to the Scriptures’ and the apostles’ *evangelium* as well as to the lessons of church history.

Study of relevant texts in their biblical context does not seem to give baptism a substantive role in creat-

³² I. S. Prokhanov, *Verouchenie Evangel'skikh Khristian* (1910) (Cherkassy: Smirna, 2002) 19. [“A person acquires salvation through: faith, penitence, repentance, and being born from above... Simultaneously with penitence and repentance, the birth from above takes place in the person’s inner nature.”]

³³ Prokhanov, *Verouchenie*, 31. [“... Water baptism is the external sign of what has earlier taken place in the soul by the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or death to sin and resurrection to righteousness... Therefore, water baptism has meaning only when it is performed for those who have consciously believed Christ, repented, converted, and received the birth from above, that is, those who have received spiritual baptism...”]

³⁴ Vas. Prok. Stepanov” *Baptist* 11 (1908), 91. [“Do you ask why a believer needs baptism? Doesn’t baptism wash away sins? No, my dear friend, water baptism doesn’t wash away sins, but it is necessary for the one who is *already* washed from sin by the blood of Christ and saved; it is necessary for the children of God who joyfully fulfill the will of their Father.”]

³⁵ “Ispovedanie very khristian-baptistov (1906)” [“Confession of faith of Christians-Baptists (1906)”] *Istoriia baptizma* (Odessa: OBS, 1996), 426-427. [There baptism is referred to as a “ceremonial proclamation,” the “first fruits of love for Christ” for those who are already “converted by the gospel.”]

ing eternal life, placing us in Christ, or giving us the Holy Spirit. Faith stands preeminent and alone at this stage. Further, attention to the apostolic teaching of faith, grace, good works and the place of Christ's cross in the gospel enables the proper recognition of baptism as the biblical tradition's normative expression of obedience by an already saved person. It also gives attention to the spiritual results that obedience in baptism does bring as a means of strengthening and supporting life as opposed to being a requirement for having life or not. Finally, attention to church history helps us to be clearer that the issue of baptism being necessary for salvation does not appear to divide along the cultural boundaries of East and West. It divides along the eternal boundary of Gospel and Not-Gospel as a muting of the evangelium's demand of faith.

All that said, however, one article of the biblical tradition deserves reiteration because it is too often overlooked in the question of baptism. In my view neglect of this prior question sets an uneasy stage for much of the way baptism's efficacy is discussed, including this essay. Hence I emphasize it as food for further reflection. The observation here is simply the uniform pattern in the

apostolic church *not to separate baptism from the moment of belief*. As we saw earlier, once heart belief was confessed quick execution of the chain of salvation was the apostles' pattern without exception. There was no testing period for new believers to be baptized and there was no required catechization of converts who came from exceptionally pagan backgrounds.³⁶ Baptism obviously was not given to those for whom it had no significance, but it also did not take weeks or months to determine whether one wanted to give up their old godhood and take the Lordship of Jesus Christ in their life and begin the long road of discipleship and transformation to His image.³⁷ In the early church baptism was truly an initiatory rite and did not function as a preemptory form of church discipline to test the validity of conversion. If needed, that was a step that came later and the church also did not hesitate to administer it.³⁸

Once the post-apostolic church adopted the innovation of a catechetical process inserted between inward heart belief and its outward expression in baptism, which is yet another reason why we cannot privilege even the earliest voices after the apostles above all others, baptism was forced from

³⁶ One often hears the comment that baptism was quickly administered in Acts because the apostles were dealing with a spiritually aware and prepared audience of Jews or god-fearing Gentiles, not the former atheists attending today's churches. Besides begging the question by assuming the need of a certain background for baptism, such reasoning is not responsible to the biblical tradition. In Acts 16 the jailer at Philippi was hardly a Gentile god-fearer who spent his Saturdays in the synagogue. By all reckoning he was a rank pagan and yet he received baptism straightway the very night of his confession (16:33)—no testing period

and no extended catechetical instruction.

³⁷ The question for baptism was settled alone on the conscious profession of informed faith, i.e., appropriation to one's life of the significance of Christ's cross. "Christ crucified" was the apostolic proclamation (e.g. 1 Cor 1:18), which, in view of Jesus' own demand to repent and submit to God's authority in one's life (Luke 9:23 and par.) did require from converts awareness of the basic elements of the *evangelium*, but it was not an abbreviated course in systematic theology either.

³⁸ Of course, administering baptism without the lengthy testing period entails the possibility

its biblical moorings in faith and the *evangelium*. What had been one nearly seamless and organic conversion of the whole person, which as we saw the apostles could express quite holistically, now became artificially broken up into distinct stages. This move immediately destabilized the meaning-center of the conversion act forcing it to drift either to the spiritual side, which tended to distort faith into the mere sum of its intellectual components and split it off from expression in the physical world, making it just an empty symbol. Conversely, it was forced to drift in an even less profitable direction and the physical rite of baptism suddenly carried more spiritual freight than the faith which supposedly under girds it.³⁹

While it has been the primary concern of this essay to show the negative effects this second option has for the gospel, I think that in both cases there is harm to the *evangelium*. The only question is to what extent. Indeed, we must be careful with Paul to locate efficacy for salvation properly in faith alone and not faith's result in baptism; but we must also hear James' exhortation that living, saving faith absolutely shows its obedience to Christ in the physical world. In this

case the normative expression of such faith is baptism.

In the biblical tradition both faith and its resulting fruit in baptism cohere more happily and holistically than they seem to in either of the options that resulted when the church diverged from Scripture's practice. Baptism's appearance in Rom 6 after a lengthy discussion of the exclusive role of faith in chs. 4 and 5 is perfectly appropriate and creates no discomfort to the apostle Paul as the chain of salvation efficiently moves to its conclusion.⁴⁰ Yet when we stray from Scripture's paradigm, not only do such phenomena of the inspired text make us ill at ease, but other teachings of Scripture suffer as collateral damage as well. In our circles a whole network of related traditions has grown up around baptism that is either biblically unfounded or poorly founded at best.⁴¹ In view of Scripture's clear and consistent example, not to mention the theological collateral damage from violating that example, perhaps the first question regarding baptism for an evangelical national theology of both East and West is how we can honor the integrity of the biblical pattern and administer baptism in closer proximity to the living faith for which it is evidence.

of baptizing some who did not have living faith and who later reveal what they really are. The apostolic church lived with this possibility but took care of the situation with church discipline (Simon Magus in Acts 18 was no doubt baptized as were the people of 1 John 2:19), and not by making baptism something it was never intended to be.

³⁹ See under "theological considerations" section one, above. Here I do not even comment on the practice of infant baptism which was another innovation of the early post-apostolic church that completely eviscerates the relationship of baptism to living faith of the one baptized. Karl Barth's critique of infant baptism is still without parallel

(K. Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* [London: SCM, 1948]).

⁴⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2001), 371-379.

⁴¹ These include (1) the belief that repentance only marks a time of preliminary weighing and counting the cost of following Christ; (2) that baptism is a new level of promise or commitment to God beyond that which was made at repentance and initial belief; and (3) that the "sealing" of the Spirit occurs at repentance and is different from the baptism of the Spirit that occurs later during water baptism.

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