

## On Several Peculiarities Of The Understanding Of Baptism In The Russian Baptist Church

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It happens that over the last two decades, having had favorable opportunity to exchange information freely, study theology, travel abroad, and compare our spiritual life with that of the rest of the world, we gradually have realized the distinctness, if not uniqueness, of native Baptist doctrine. From among all the complexities of the issues related to this topic, I would like to single out one for this article: the understanding of water baptism in the Russian-Ukrainian Evangelical Baptist Union.

One must admit that there is a certain problem here. On the one hand, the Baptists always talk much and eloquently about the importance and necessity of baptism,<sup>1</sup> to which the name of their own denomination obliges them to a certain extent (derived, as is well known, from the Greek root *baptw*, *baptizw*: “immerse,” “baptize”). On the other hand Russian Baptists, uncritically following the well-known patterns of Western systematic theology, unswervingly emphasize that baptism does not save (it is faith in the Triune God, sincere repentance, and conversion that save).<sup>2</sup> The situation is completely confused by the traditional evangelical rejection and condemnation of any kind of religious ritualism, which seems to us to take place only in historic (Roman Catholic, Orthodox) churches, but never in the Protestant ones.<sup>3</sup> However, from all these things,



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<sup>1</sup> Cf. for example: *Osnovnye printsipy very evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov*. Sbornik publikatsiy (Odessa, 1992), 112-116.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. an overview of this theme in M. Erickson, *Khristianskoe bogoslovie* (St. Petersburg: Bibliia dlia vsekh, 1999), 920-933.

<sup>3</sup> Here is a typical statement: “It is impossible that He (Christ) made salvation depend on ritual!... Jesus Christ says concerning His faith that it is purely spiritual; in what way can He connect regeneration with the special use of water? I would not be able to explain how it happens mechanically... that simple sprinkling with several drops of water or even the immersion of a man in water can save his soul” (Charles H. Spurgeon, *Vozrozhdenie cherez kreshchenie?* [Odessa: Khristianskoe prosveshchenie, 1993], 9-10).

according to the inexorable laws of logic, there flows a dilemma that is quite difficult for Baptist theology: we should either agree with the water salvation of the baptistery (then all our zeal in favor of baptism would be well grounded), or we should consider the baptism by faith in Baptist congregations to be only a pious ritual, a more or less meaningful rite which, by the way, hardly differs from the numerous symbolical worship rituals in the historic churches.

Such a difficult choice did not come before our Baptist union suddenly. For already quite a long time the traditional reliance on the inconclusive translation of 1 Pet 3:21 in the Synodal Version, “baptism... [is] not the removal of dirt from the body, but the *promise* of a good conscience to God,”<sup>4</sup> has been placing the new convert in a Baptist congregation in the theologically dubious position of a self-assured person who easily promises something very important to God but which is hardly in his or her own control. It is much better humbly to implore the Lord, clearly realizing that

we receive all spiritual blessings from Him alone.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Baptists for some reason completely ignore the ending of 1 Pet 3:21 (which in this case is translated absolutely correctly): “[Baptism] *saves* (SWZW) you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”

Thus, the sense of the biblical text in the original is that of asking God for a good conscience at the moment of baptism and of by grace obtaining salvation in our risen Lord Jesus Christ. Yet in the Baptist churches, by virtue of established tradition, the given verse is interpreted as a kind of “solemn promise” (if not an “oath”)<sup>6</sup> which, essentially, is a ritual action, while, unfortunately, we often ignore the word *save*. After all, everyone knows that “baptism does not save,” but it is faith and repentance that save.<sup>7</sup>

Where is the way out of this predicament? Can it be that baptism among the Baptists is really “without grace”<sup>8</sup> and that we are left with only a formal ritual in which we are comforted that we have *already been saved* at the moment of repentance (several

<sup>4</sup>The Greek word *eperwthma* in 1 Pet 3:21 in contemporary versions of the New Testament in all the main languages of the world is usually translated as “request,” or “appeal” to God for a good conscience.

<sup>5</sup>In this connection I recall another not very attractive picture: sometimes a line of people forms to be baptized by one minister while nobody lines up for another. In order not to yield to Donatist seduction, as though the effectiveness of the sacrament depended on the personal holiness of a human being (a minister in this case), this practice should be eliminated by all possible means, reminding the congregations that we receive all spiritual gifts and blessings from God alone.

<sup>6</sup>More than once at traditional “examinations” and also immediately before baptisms in the churches of our union I have heard ministers ask the following characteristic question: “Do you,

brother (sister) promise to serve God in good conscience?” “I promise!” solemnly answer the similarly instructed new converts. True, to the credit of our congregations it should be noted that, instinctively sensing a kind of boast in such assertions, we usually add the good and humble Christian words, “with God’s help,” or “if it please the Lord.”

<sup>7</sup>We know that Christ Himself was baptized in the Jordan and the apostles were commanded to baptize; we are taught to prayerfully fold our arms before being immersed in water; to assume the appropriate position with our bodies; to pronounce the proper words; and to put on snow white robes, but we have no convincing theological explanation for all this ceremony.

<sup>8</sup>See Rev. V. Rubskiy, *Pravoslavie – Protestantism. Shtrihi polemiki.*, ch. 6, “Kreshchenie,” <http://pravbeseda.ru/library/index.php?page=book&id=654>

months or sometimes even years ago)? To be sure, here we can remember that baptism “symbolizes spiritual cleansing,”<sup>9</sup> “symbolizes repentance and the forgiveness of sins,”<sup>10</sup> that it is a “sign,” or “seal” of God’s grace, or even “a symbol of salvation”<sup>11</sup> as famous Protestant systematic authors maintain; however, the problem is not completely eliminated since all of this deals with only the external side of the matter.

What, then, happens in the spiritual realm at the moment of baptism? What is its ontological sense? Scripture says that baptism in a mystical way unites a believer with the Lord Jesus Christ in His death and resurrection (Rom 6:3-11); it places him in the Body of Christ, the church (1 Cor 12:13); it clothes the believer with Christ (Gal 3:27); renews by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5); washes away sins (Acts 22:16). It is curious to note that the best native Baptist authors are still inclined to interpret these familiar biblical texts not in the Western rationalistic (or symbolic) sense, but in the mainstream of Eastern tradition—the theology of sacrament.<sup>12</sup>

Although the means of salvation for sinners is the Blood of Christ alone, which cleanses us from sin; nevertheless, *our salvation is confirmed and accomplished by baptism*

*into the death of the Lord.* The risen life of Jesus takes effect in us only through baptism into His death (1 Pet 3:21; Rom 6:3-4)... A bridegroom and a bride... enter married life only after the wedding... Baptism is a kind of wedding of a Christian with the Body of Christ, the church.<sup>13</sup>

We recognize that behind the visible form of the ministry accomplished is a hidden, invisible spiritual meaning in which God Himself *gives the grace of His blessing*... Baptism as something external, i.e. a ritual, does not save, but for those who have experienced regeneration it is necessary, because it is really *an element of salvation*, “Corresponding to that, baptism now saves... through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 3:21)... Thus, baptism is not merely a ritual that gives one the right to participate in the Lord’s Supper, but is a necessary condition for communion in the Body of Jesus Christ, the church (1 Cor 12:13).<sup>14</sup>

Studying Scripture we see that especially in the Book of Acts *baptism is closely connected with receiving the Holy Spirit*. On the other hand, we cannot limit God in His free outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Examining the various conditions under which the Holy Spirit was poured out we clearly see that although it is possible to formulate the teaching, *life is more complex than any formula*...<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 628-9.

<sup>10</sup> See Charles Ryrie, *Osnovy bogosloviia* (St. Petersburg: Bibleyskiy pedagogicheskiy institut, 2000), 501.

<sup>11</sup> See Erickson, *Khristianskoe bogoslovie*, 923, 925.

<sup>12</sup> The italics in the quoted passages are mine – C.P.

<sup>13</sup> N. P. Khrapov, ed., *Dom Bozhii i sluzhenie v nem (Souz evangel'skich khristian-baptistov) 1972-1974*. <http://www.blagovestnik.org/books/00280.htm#5>

<sup>14</sup> N. A. Kolesnikov, *Khristianin, znaesh' li ty, kak dolzhno postupat' v dome Bozh'em?* Vol. 1 (Moscow: Druzhba i Blagaya Vest', 1998), 44-49.

<sup>15</sup> M. Zhidkov, “Vodnoe kreshchenie i vecheria Gospodnia, *Bratskiy vestnik* No. 2 (1975): 57. Receiving the Holy Spirit, in fact, is the main distinction between the immersion of people in the waters of the Jordan by John the Baptist (which was merely a sign of the future sacrament: “I baptize you with water...”) and present day Christian baptism (“He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit...”).

*Receiving the Holy Spirit and baptism are closely connected with one another, although it is impossible to establish a single order. It is important that by means of baptism a person becomes a member of the local church of Christ...*<sup>16</sup>

The immersion of Christ the water of baptism foreshadowed His immersion in the water of death... He voluntarily took on Himself retribution for the sins of all people... It is necessary to note that in baptism we receive special blessings. The Lord grants us *the grace of the Holy Spirit and accepts us in the Church* as His children.<sup>17</sup>

Water baptism... has a profound and not completely explainable meaning... Baptism is a kind of final point in the process of a sinner's conversion and unites him with Christ; that is why it is *a necessary element of salvation*... Salvation depends not on repentance in itself, but exclusively on the unity of the spiritual and material: *faith from all the heart expressed in repentance and water baptism*.<sup>18</sup>

If we turn to the traditional songs of our brethren, which were used in worship long before perestroika and consequently before the active Western influence on domestic theology began, we see not a completely superficial (symbolical) approach to baptism, but rather a reverential attitude to it, as to an inexpressible sacrament.

The babbling brook will not tell  
My *holy mystery* to anyone...

It will not tell what the waves heard  
My *mystery* of a humble soul...  
I accepted *holy baptism*,  
I made a *holy covenant with God*...  
Making my soul alive with peace,  
God sent *grace* to my heart...  
The brook was a silent witness  
Of my *great and holy mystery*...  
(*Pesn' vrozozhdeniia* [Song of revival] #408).

I am on *the bank of burial*,  
In *the watery graveyard*;  
As a sacrifice to God, without a  
single doubt,  
I give myself wholeheartedly.  
Oh, *accept me*, Savior,  
Into Your faithful *Church*...  
(*Pesn' vrozozhdeniia* [Song of revival] # 414).

It is unlikely that anyone would question that worship songs inevitably, directly or indirectly, reflect the theology of their time. The hymns quoted above (and others) of the Evangelical Baptist brotherhood, definitely express not a rationalistic, but rather an apophatic, inscrutably mysterious attitude to *holy water baptism* (as it is called in our churches—not by accident), which, of course, cannot in any way be a formal ritual and rite. Below are given several characteristic quotations from old issues of *Bratskiy vestnik* [*Fraternal bulletin*]:<sup>19</sup>

Odessa region, city of Reni: "The church held *water baptism*. Several souls *redeemed by the Blood of Christ*, joined the church. The children of God sincerely thanked the Lord for His *saving grace*."<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> R. Vyzu, "Vy khram Bozhiy, i Dukh Bozhiy zhiwet v vas," *Bratskiy vestnik* No 2 (1985): 21.

<sup>17</sup> V. Kulikov, "Nadlezhit nam ispolnit' vsyakuyu pravdu", *Bratskiy vestnik* No. 6 (1987): 11.

<sup>18</sup> S. V. Sannikov, *Podgotovka k kreshcheniyu*

(Odessa: OBS, 2005), 164-65.

<sup>19</sup> These excerpts are from the regular column of news items entitled, "From the life of the local church."

<sup>20</sup> *Bratskiy vestnik* No. 5 (1975): 77.

Sumy region, city of Romny: “The souls *washed by the Blood of Christ were joined with the church through holy water baptism.*”<sup>21</sup>

“In July of this year through *holy water baptism* new souls joined the church in Yaroslavl... After baptism they served communion. With joy and reverence new members *participated in the Body and Blood of Christ.* Brothers and sisters in the faith cordially congratulated those baptized and wished them growth in *the grace of God.*”<sup>22</sup>

“The children of God in the church of Zhitomir *baptized* new members. Those who made a covenant with the Lord sincerely thanked Him for *salvation and the gift of eternal life.*”<sup>23</sup>

Kazakhstan, village of Ust'-Kalmanka: “On Sunday in the river Kalmanka... *holy water baptism* was accomplished... Believers in turn entered the water of the river in order that *before the face of the Lord and the church they would bury their old self in the water and rise to a new life.*”<sup>24</sup>

Here we see not so much an external worship form as a sacrament,

doubtless related to “salvation and the gift of eternal life.” The super-rational idea of burial and resurrection together with Christ Himself in the sacramental waters of baptism attains the most unexpected additions among Russian Baptists. The author thinks that Orthodox people would certainly experience something similar if most of them were not baptized in infancy (when it is scarcely possible to have not only personal faith, but any sort of mystical experience). In this way Russian Baptists, baptized as adults and simultaneously retaining many features of Eastern Christian thinking apparently have a particularly “mystical” quality in their immediate experience of the sacrament of baptism.

There are many stories among Russian Baptists about numerous miracles by the action of God’s grace at the moment of baptism,<sup>25</sup> the zealous desire<sup>26</sup> of some new converts to be baptized in cold and even icy water (sometimes in winter in a hole chopped in the ice).<sup>27</sup> In addition, we should mention the necessity of fast-

<sup>21</sup> *Bratskiy vestnik* No. 6 (1979): 67.

<sup>22</sup> *Bratskiy vestnik* No. 5 (1986): 74.

<sup>23</sup> *Bratskiy vestnik* No. 5 (1987): 68.

<sup>24</sup> *Bratskiy vestnik* No. 2 (1992): 92.

<sup>25</sup> For example, healings from incurable diseases (testimony of presbyter Ia. A. Meleshkevich, city of Bishkul’, Kazakhstan, 2003; church members L. V. Savinskaia, Salt Lake City, Utah, 2006, T. Sysoeva, Syracuse, New York, 2007 and others); signs and visions above the baptism water (testimony of a presbyter from Kiev, P. F. Kunda, Sacramento, California, 2006), etc. Here it should be noted that Russian Baptists (as distinct, let us say, from Charismatics) do not teach healing and are even somewhat cautious about it. All the same, the release of church members from serious illnesses as a result of a sacramental approach to baptism is not rare.

<sup>26</sup> For example, a great desire to be baptized contrary to prohibitions in the U.S.S.R. and even contrary to the presbyter’s fear of the authorities (testimony of Vasil’evs, Sacramento, California, 2006); an uncontrollable desire to return to the place of baptism outside of the city on the next day to pray, although it was a very long walk (testimony of church member from Kazakhstan, N. D. Chumakina, Seattle, Washington, 2006).

<sup>27</sup> Cf., for example, the interview with A. Galkin in *Khristianskoe slovo* #3 (2005): 12-13. A presbyter from Tatarstan, N. V. Saburskiy (Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2006) also tells about a similar practice before perestroika. One of the leaders of the Council of Churches, M. I. Khorev, testifies that he twice conducted baptisms in the winter in icy water (*Vestnik istiny* No. 1 (1984): 44.

ing<sup>28</sup> for those being baptized, their special, elevated prayerful condition. Ministers of the church often testify concerning the healing of their own serious afflictions when they baptize with faith.<sup>29</sup> Before the ritual begins, the presbyters usually offer a special prayer, stretching their hands over the water.<sup>30</sup>

In Baptist congregations, as a rule, groups preparing for baptism are organized where the basics of Christian doctrine are studied; however, we have never overemphasized reliance on knowledge. New converts are encouraged to have faith rather than knowledge, and baptism itself is often perceived as the most important

part of the unseen battle against “the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12).<sup>31</sup> It can hardly be connected with the Western Protestant symbolic understanding of baptism.<sup>32</sup>

In the native evangelical tradition the special importance of the sacrament is testified to by the unusually strict probation period before baptism in Baptist congregations, which I can only compare with the Orthodox order of monastic profession. Below are given the key points of the Orthodox-monastic<sup>33</sup> and traditional Baptist<sup>34</sup> patterns for acceptance into the “brotherhood.”

#### ORTHODOX MONASTERY

1. Three-year trial period of “obedience” before taking the habit.
2. Obedience is usually supervised by an elder.
3. Novices, as a rule, do the “dirtiest” jobs in the monastery.

#### BAPTIST CONGREGATION

1. In Soviet times a two- or three-year trial period (nowadays one year, as a rule) before baptism.
2. A new convert is usually tutored by an experienced member of the congregation.
3. New converts often zealously do physical work (construction and improvement of church buildings).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. N. P. Khrapov, *Dom Bozhy*, <http://www.blagovestnik.org/books/00280.htm#6>

<sup>29</sup> Cf., for example, memoirs of Ia. Leven, “Kreshchenie—istselenie” in *Mezhdunarodnaya khristianskaia gazeta* No. 8 (2005).

<sup>30</sup> During this prayer something similar to the Orthodox *sanctification of the water* takes place. It becomes especially evident by comparison with the prayer of sanctification of oil (olive oil) which is practiced by ECB presbyters before anointing the sick, cf., for example, I. Gnida, *Tserkovnie ustanovleniia*, *Bratskiy vestnik* No. 4 (1988): 75-78.

<sup>31</sup> It is not accidental that while immersing, Russian Baptists consider it important not to leave even the smallest part of the body out of the water. It is directly connected with the spiritual world, since immersion is viewed as complete

death to sin so that the enemy of human souls would not have any opportunity (“foothold” as an “unbaptized” part of the body) to influence a Christian in any way. If a baptism is still incomplete, they do not immerse in water again, but a presbyter takes a handful of water and “washes” the dry part of the body. See also *Vestnik istiny* No 1 (1977): 8-10.

<sup>32</sup> Even a negative (“Donatist”) tendency to re-baptize those who have come from other Christian denominations also demonstrates a hidden inclination to sacramentalism; one hears the claim, “True baptism is only in our church!”

<sup>33</sup> According to M. Kudryavtsev, *Istoriia pravoslavnogo monashestva* (Moscow: Krutitskoe patriarshee podvor’ie, 1999), 72-77.

4. Immediately before profession a long and carefully elaborated procedure of the “testing” of a novice takes place.
5. At the beginning of the ritual the novice stands on the porch waiting for permission to enter.
6. In the monastery church the brothers meet the novice with singing, likening this event to the meeting of the father with the prodigal son from the New Testament parable.
7. The superior gives a short exhortation to the novice reminding him of the importance of monastic vows.
8. The first of the three “irrevocable” vows required at profession is “virginity” or celibacy, i.e. voluntary refusal of the novice from the intention of ever entering the bonds of wedlock.
9. The second obligatory life-long vow is poverty or “voluntary poverty,” the deliberate refusal to own any property for the benefit of all brethren.
10. The third and final life-long monastic vow is obedience which is complete submission to superior and spiritual elders.
4. Immediately before baptism (acceptance as a member of the congregation) a new convert goes through a serious “testing.”
5. Before testing, new converts wait outside the sanctuary for their turn to come in by invitation.
6. At a membership meeting hymns are sung, usually about the church, the joining of which is traditionally compared to joining a friendly family.
7. A presbyter directs the attention of the new convert to the importance of membership in the church and responsibility before God.
8. Although there is no official refusal of married life among the Baptists, in practice, especially among women, there is a high percentage of singles who, in fact, become nuns, completely dedicating themselves to serving God.
9. Most Russian Baptists are quite poor which is closely connected with their disapproving (“monastic”) attitude to business initiative; on the other hand, regular gatherings of offerings create a sizable congregational property.
10. The person on probation is required to agree with the accepted rules and discipline, the basis of which is obedience to ministers of the church and the decisions of the congregation.

11. The superior traditionally asks before the beginning of profession, "Why did you come, brother, to this holy altar and holy company?" (as if he does not know the reason); the expected answer is, "I desire a life of penance, honored Father!"
12. The superior asks many additional questions: Does the novice profess by his own free will? Did he make the choice for his whole life? Will the new monk keep himself in reverence and obedience? Will he suffer for the Lord's sake? The expected answer to those questions is, "Yes, with God's help."
13. The superior makes clear what the monk's life is about; he reminds the novice about temptations and Satan's attacks; he gives the example of Christ and the holy men who overcame the evil one. Then he asks the one desiring profession, "Will you abide in these vows till the end of your life?" "Yes, with God's help."
14. The superior again, as a means of testing, orders the novice to give him scissors which he does not accept immediately (the scissors are offered three times) thereby underlining the good will and initiative of the novice.
15. The profession is done in the name of the Holy Trinity, after which a novice becomes a monk.
11. The presbyter traditionally asks at the beginning of the probation, "What brought you here? What do you desire from the church?" (as if he does not know the reason); the expected answer is, "I desire to be baptized and become a member of the church!"
12. The presbyter and church members ask many questions in order to make sure of the new convert's sincerity and firmness of desire to become a member of the church. The expected answer to all similar questions concerning whether a new convert can live according to Christ's commandments is, "Yes, with God's help."
13. The presbyter reminds the candidate of the meaning of baptism, saying that after it a young Christian is exposed to especially strong temptations, for it was so with Christ himself: after baptism Satan tempted Him. Then often the question is posed, "Do you promise to serve God in good conscience?" "Yes, I do!" (with God's help).
14. The presbyter, finishing the testing, traditionally asks, as if talking the new convert out of a rash decision, "What if the church refuses to baptize you today? How about being baptized next year?"
15. Baptism is done in the name of the Holy Trinity, after which the candidate becomes a member of the church.



Although the native Baptist “testing” before baptism doubtless has a connection with a similar Mennonite tradition,<sup>35</sup> nevertheless, in our opinion, it is impossible to deny the Orthodox-monastic influence. Living in one country, the Orthodox and Baptists inevitably have contact and no small number of Baptists has spent some part of their lives in the Orthodox Church, which of course could not but leave a trace on them. In any case, many monastic traditions have amazing parallels in Russian Baptist life. There is, first of all, devoting oneself to God, joining the church/brotherhood by the way of conscious adult choice (both Baptists and Orthodox monks), and not through infant baptism; there is quite a strict discipline (both of the former and the latter); and to some degree isolation in their congregations and, at the same time, evangelizing activity; there is also their well-known practicality in earthly matters: frugality, domesticity, and so on. Obviously the native Baptist church, if judged at all objectively, presents a rare kind of mo-

nasticism, namely monasticism in the world.<sup>36</sup> And this difficult spiritual way begins with the moment of baptism.

The Western Protestant (and Baptist, in particular) mindset, as a rule, is individualistic: in essence, only one’s personal relationship with God matters; everyone has his own Bible and the opportunity to pray and that is why, by and large, the pastor and congregation have no right to command anyone.<sup>37</sup> To the American writer and philosopher Ayn Rand belongs the idea that civilization expressed in individualism resists the barbarism expressed in communal life.<sup>38</sup> The thought is certainly ingenious; many of our contemporaries do see it this way, but from the Christian perspective this issue is quite debatable, for the communal barbarism mentioned above is clearly shown in the gospel and commanded by Christ. From it flows the special significance of Russian Baptist baptism as entering into community,<sup>39</sup> into the church congregation, which is the Body of Christ. “For we were all baptized by one Spir-

<sup>34</sup> According to Kolesnikov, *Khristianin, zn-aesh’ li ty...?* pp. 45-50; and also from the ministry experience of the author.

<sup>35</sup> See P. M. Friesen, *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)*, (Fresno, Calif.: General Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1978), 291.

<sup>36</sup> On Orthodox monasticism in the world cf., for example: Archbishop Ioann (Shakovskoi), “Beloe inochestvo” in *Izbrannoe* (Petrozavodsk: Sviatoi ostrov, 1992), 118-128; Prot. Valentin (Svenitskiy), *Monastyr’ v miru* (Moscow: Lestvitsa, 1999); M. A. Pis’menny, comp., *Zhitie prepodobnogo Sergiia Radonezhskogo* (Moscow: RIPOL KLASSIC, 2003), 27. The basic idea of these sources is that good Christians are capable of living a life in the world very close to monasticism, whether they have a family or not (“beloe inochestvo” [“white monasticism”]).

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, how this question is handled by I. J. Van Ness in his well-known book with the characteristic title *The Baptist Spirit* (I. J. Van Ness, *The Baptist Spirit* [Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1926], pp. 33-35). See also J. T. Odle, ed., *Why I am a Baptist* (Nashville: Broadman, 1972); W. P. Tuck, *Our Baptist Tradition* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc., 1993); C. P. Staton, Jr., ed., *Why I am a Baptist: Reflections on being Baptist in the 21st Century* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. 1999), and etc.

<sup>38</sup> See Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead* (1943), <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/a/aynrand147957.html>

<sup>39</sup> The Russian Orthodox theologian A. S. Khomiakov defined *sobornost’* [community] as unity in diversity, “the unity of God’s grace living in a multitude of created intelligences captivat-

it into one body...” (1 Cor 12:13), and this Body is the Church of our Lord, Jesus Christ (Eph 1:22-23; Col 1:18). Baptism as joining with the church, the holy assembly, is confirmed in national Baptist practice by the fact that only after this service and not an instant before, a new convert becomes a full-fledged member of the church. His name is written down in the church book;<sup>40</sup> he participates in the Lord’s Supper, is admitted to the membership meeting, and earnestly invited for spiritual service (preaching, singing in the choir, etc.); a Christian marriage becomes possible for him. Again, a formal ritual cannot possibly have such a far-reaching meaning.

Is baptism salvific, or does it contain only images and symbols? Unlike the main line of interpretation of the topic by the Western Baptist church, baptism in the Russian brotherhood of Evangelical Christians-Baptists, as noted above, has reason to be regarded as a “necessary element of salvation,” i.e. salvation is not only in repentance, but in “faith expressed in repentance and baptism.” While generally in agreement with this formula, we would like to sharpen it. What does salvation mean in the theological sense, both in repentance (faith) and in baptism? Is a repentant sinner “half” saved? Does he obtain the remaining 50% of saving grace in

baptism? Thinking in this superficial way will never lead to anything good, but will only give birth to fictitious images of something like “centaurs,” half people-half horses. What shall we do?

Bearing in mind that all basic Christian doctrines of faith are mysteriously built on antinomies,<sup>41</sup> we will dare to assume the viability of the following paradoxical statement: since the Bible makes it clear that both repentance and baptism are salvific, we must accept two positions simultaneously and without limitation on either side, that one hundred per cent of salvation is obtained in repentance (with faith) and one hundred per cent of salvation is obtained in baptism (by faith). As it is written:

“He that *believes* and is *baptized* shall be saved” (Mark 16:16).

“*Repent*, and be *baptized* every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall *receive the gift of the Holy Ghost*” (Acts 2:38).

“Except a man be born of *water* and [of] the *Spirit*, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

Just as the two natures of Christ cannot be confounded or separated without detriment to the truth, so salvation is unconfounded and inseparable and obtains in fullness from repentance and baptism. Although outwardly it appears pious to emphasize

ed by grace” (A. S. Khomiakov, *Tserkov’ odna* <http://pravbeseda.ru/library/index.php?page=book&id=238#1>). In traditional Russian Baptist teaching we find the same motif: “We cannot carry out many tasks of the Kingdom of God on our own but only collectively as a whole church. Therefore... we also say our prayers together with the church. And our active involvement in the church helps the fulfillment of that prayer” (R.

P. Vyzu, “Nagornaia propoved” *Bratskiy vestnik* No. 2 (1982): 13.

<sup>40</sup> This is a list of church members, sometimes not very modestly compared to “the book of life” Phil 4:3 and Heb 12:23.

<sup>41</sup> God is one, but Triune; Jesus Christ is true God and true Man at the same time; all events in the world are predestined, but man possesses freedom, etc.

the deity of Christ, if such emphasis does injustice to Christ's humanity immediately we do not have piety, but half-blind Monophysitism. Likewise, the fullness of salvation is in repentance and baptism, not in repentance only (and not in baptism only).

Therefore, "He that believes and is baptized shall be saved" (Mark 16:16a). If a person who has believed in Christ as Savior has not had a favorable opportunity to be baptized (such as the repentant thief on the cross next to Jesus, new converts who have been martyred, someone with a terminal disease, because of negligent priests, etc.) that person is saved exclusively by faith through his sincere repentance before the Lord. "But he that believes not shall be damned" (Mark 16:16b); here, as we see, it does not speak about baptism. However, I think it does not speak about baptism, not because repentance is more important (a favorite, but hasty interpretation of some Christians), but because always and everywhere there were and are sincere believers who did not have a blessed day of baptism for reasons beyond their control.

In practice in our congregations it may look as follows: if a person has repented but does not desire to be baptized and in every way disparages it<sup>42</sup> -it means that this person is not saved yet (for he has neither true faith, nor baptism); but if a person has repented and wholeheartedly wants to be bap-

tized, it is a sure sign of salvation. Unfortunately, most people who repent in church are not regenerated, but return to the world and continue their former sinful life. It is pointless to deny it. It must mean that repentance is not the whole matter. Moreover, we ought not to deceive such people (and be deceived ourselves) regarding the allegedly saving effect of their repentance. Therefore, if a person has repented of his sins and wholeheartedly desires to be baptized, then it is relevant to remember that salvation is one hundred per cent in repentance, and baptism is the inevitable continuation of this saving way, as a good tree will yield good fruit in due time (Matt 7:17). If a person has repented in church but has no desire to be baptized, we should remember that salvation is one hundred per cent in baptism and not deceive anyone with fond hopes.

Water by itself, of course, cannot give salvation to a person. It is baptism with the Holy Spirit (regeneration) that is the true, profound, and invisible reason for eternal salvation; it is true both at the moment of repentance and at the moment of water baptism. "For by one Spirit we are all baptized into one body, and have all been made to drink of one Spirit" (1 Cor 12:13). Thus, scriptural examples of the regeneration of people before baptism (for example, the centurion Cornelius and his relatives in Acts 10:44-48, the "repentant thief" on the cross in Luke 23:40-43) should not be set in opposition to gospel stories about regeneration at the moment of baptism or immediately after it (Acts 8:12-17; 19:5-6). There is no single "norma-

<sup>42</sup> Incidentally, the number of such people is increasing in Baptist churches. They visit our services but do not wish to submit to church discipline. They say that only "living faith" saves, not "formal membership in a church." The dogmatic loophole for such views is provided by the teaching about salvation only as repentance of sin.

tive” text with which other verses should dovetail, shamefacedly called, for some reason or another, “exceptions to the rule.” Both the former (regeneration through repentance, before baptism) and the latter (regeneration after repentance, during, and even after baptism) are true.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, these are not two regenerations of the same person, but rather the free action of the Holy Spirit, unrestrained by any human ideas about Him (“as He will,” 1 Cor 12:11), i.e. in some cases the descent of the Spirit on a person, without doubt, takes place before water baptism (Acts 9:17-18), while in other cases, likewise undoubtedly, at the time of baptism or even afterward (Acts 8:16-17.39).<sup>44</sup>

Someone may ask, Why be baptized if the Spirit has already descended on a person before water baptism? My answer is that since the Spirit descends invisibly, we cannot have the full assurance that He has really done so until we are baptized. If the Holy Spirit did descend before baptism, He is, of course, not removed in baptism, and in this sense the sacrament will still happen. And after sincere repentance and baptism by faith the Holy Spirit surely dwells in every Christian, but at what moment he descends remains a mystery to us.

Thus, on the one hand, water does not matter at all, but only what occurs in the spiritual world. On the other hand, faith alone, without any connection with material objects, is not something that pleases God. For a Christian the priority of the spiritual world over the material one is unarguable, but while a person lives on earth, he has to consider physical reality also. If only faith matters, why immerse in water? We might as well interpret baptism allegorically, as the Dukhobors and Molokans did.<sup>45</sup> But just as we need real bread and a cup with wine at communion, through which we commune with the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ, so water in baptism is absolutely indispensable. In authentic sacrament both spiritual and material beginnings are closely intertwined. It is while uniting the spiritual (faith) and material (water) worlds that God’s grace is manifested and the Holy Spirit is bestowed (Acts 2:38; John 3:5; Titus 3:5). Since Scripture tells us that baptism is “one” (Eph 4:5), this sacrament can be defined in the following way: a single evangelical baptism has two aspects: water baptism (in the visible, material world) and baptism by the Holy Spirit (in the invisible, spiritual world) and those two con-

<sup>43</sup> It is worth noting that the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove on Jesus Christ happened during His baptism in the Jordan (Matt 3:16; Mark 1:10; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-33).

<sup>44</sup> If we do not agree with the teaching of the descent of the Holy Spirit on people who are baptized, then why, in traditional Baptist churches, in imitation of apostolic practice (Acts 8:16-17; 19:5-6), do they necessarily lay hands on baptismal candidates on the river bank (or wherever the baptism has taken place)? On a practical level it means this question is rightly raised by ministers

of the church: “From the life of local churches, city of Kirovograd. The new converts made a covenant with the Lord through holy water baptism. This was done in the baptistery of the church building... *After reading the words: “Come, lay... Your hand...” (Matt 9:18) the brothers prayed over the baptized people with the laying on of hands,*” (*Bratskiy vestnik* No. 6 [1977]: 71).

<sup>45</sup> See S. N. Savinskiy, *Istoriia evangel'skikh khristian-baptistov Ukrainy, Rossii, Belorussii* (1867-1917), (St. Petersburg: Bibliia dlia vsekh, 1999), 45.49.

stituents of one service can coincide in time as well as have a certain interval between them (as when, for example, baptism by the Holy Spirit happens at a person's repentance).<sup>46</sup>

If, as mentioned above, during the Lord's Supper, in uniting earthly and heavenly things by means of the Bread and the Cup we are joined to the Body and Blood of the Savior,<sup>47</sup> then what is baptismal water, since it is absolutely indispensable? Scripture is not silent about it (if only we can receive what is said): "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb 10:19,22). In this way the New Testament many times states a miraculously close connection between washing away human sins by the Blood of the Savior (1 John 1:7; Rev 1:5) and washing away the same sins by baptizing water (Acts 22:16; Heb 10:22).<sup>48</sup> In other words, water myste-

riously becomes the place where, with sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit, the Suffering Christ Himself is present. We die with Him in a watery tomb, which is no different from the Lord's tomb in Jerusalem ("Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death..." Rom 6.4), and His holy Blood truly washes us and cleanses us from sin (Acts 22:16; Rev 1:5); and, having risen from the baptistery, we are truly resurrected with Him to a new, victorious Christian life ("Now if we be dead with Christ... we shall also live with him" Rom 6:8).

It is characteristic that the Baptists at baptism are immersed in water only once (not three times as in most of Christian world),<sup>49</sup> thereby underlining the fact that it is possible to die only once.<sup>50</sup> This single, full immersion is done in the name of the Holy Trinity. As it is written, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (Matt 28:19). In the Greek original, and also in the Russian translation, the noun "name" (имя) is in the singular, not plural. The Baptists, as many other

<sup>46</sup> That is why, from a purely theological point of view, water baptism immediately after repentance is of great benefit, which helps to minimize the tension of the question concerning at what exact moment regeneration occurs (at repentance or baptism). From a pastoral viewpoint, of course, we want to know a person better, teach, test, and then baptize.

<sup>47</sup> See details in C. Prokhorov "Apophatism and Cataphatism in Protestantism," *Theological Reflections/ Bogoslovskie razmyshleniia* #6 (2006): 46-57.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. 1 John 5:6: "This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that bears witness, because the Spirit is truth." All the best expositors see in this verse the water of bap-

tism, the blood of Calvary and the gracious action of the Holy Spirit. This gospel harmony is felt in several descriptions of national Baptist baptism: "City of Kustanai... *During baptism* the choir sang spiritual hymns. The baptized souls sincerely praised and thanked the Lord for His love to people and for the *Blood He shed on the cross of Calvary, cleansing us from every sin. Here, on the bank of the river they prayed and laid hands on those baptized...*" (*Bratskiy vestnik*, No. 5 [1989]: 96).

<sup>49</sup> See H. F. Brown, *Baptism through the Centuries* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1965), 18-21.

<sup>50</sup> Hence the traditional way of immersion among the Baptists—falling backward like one dead.

Protestant congregations, baptize “in the name” (not in the names) of the one Trinity. We call attention to it here not to continue pointless arguments with historic churches, not questioning their form of baptism at all, but only clarifying on what basis the Baptists are immersed in water only once. Besides, the first baptisms in apostolic times were done simply “in the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 2:38; 8:37; 10:48). It is quite doubtful that Christ Himself was immersed in water three times, as John the Baptist did his work long before the day of Pentecost, and so it would be problematic to explain the three-fold immersion.

Finally, what about the children of Baptists? Not being baptized (before the age of accountability), are they really spiritually disregarded in evangelical congregations?<sup>51</sup> Metropolitan Makarius expresses the Orthodox understanding of infant baptism in the following way:

In the Old Testament circumcision, through which Israelites made a covenant with God, was done by His command to infants (Ge 17:12). But the Old Testament circumcision was a type of the sacrament of baptism through which we make a covenant with God in the New Testament (Col 2:11-12; Gal 3:26-29). Consequent-

ly, if in the Old Testament God considered infants to be able to make a covenant with God, why deprive them of this benefit in the New Testament?<sup>52</sup>

The answer to this important question can also be found in the Scripture: although our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was circumcised in infancy, He still was baptized as an adult, which He also commanded us, His disciples, to do (Luke 2:21; Matt 3:13-15; 28:19-20). Instead of infant baptism, Evangelical Christians-Baptists widely practice the *blessing* of children. And this ministry relates to religious rites, i.e. sacraments.<sup>53</sup>

The blessing of children was practiced even in the time of the patriarchs (Gen 48:13-16). Usually while praying, they laid their hands on the children’s heads, but it also happened that they took them in their arms (Luke 2:28). Christ Himself, blessing children, embraced them (Mark 10:16)... Blessing is asked in the beginning of every deed. So the blessing of children should be done in their infancy... Infant baptism does not correspond to the Scripture, but children cannot remain outside of spiritual communion, which is the ministry of *blessing children* that we have. It should be taught and observed so that the people of God would not be deprived of blessing...

<sup>51</sup> See Rev. V. Rubsky, *Pravoslavie – Protestantism*, ch. 7, “Infant baptism.” <http://pravbeseda.ru/library/index.php?page=book&id=655>

<sup>52</sup> Metropolitan Makariy, *Pravoslavno-dogmaticheskoe bogoslovie*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Palomnik, 1999), 338.

<sup>53</sup> N. A. Kolesnikov, *Khristianin, znaesh’ li ty...?* 41-42. The following is another testimony very typical for the Baptist fellowship on this topic: “Once a baby was brought to me for blessing. They asked, ‘Please, bless him!’ I answered those parents, ‘Who am I to bless? I can only wish your

baby happiness and health, but I cannot give him anything; only God can bless...’ And then they exhorted me saying, ‘Yes, please pray so that God would bless!’ What is the difference between the church prayers of blessing from our usual prayers for children? Here is a real example: soon the same baby who was blessed fell into an open basement from a high place – and not a single bruise or scratch! That is how God protected him, His grace and blessing...” (Testimony of a presbyter from Rostov, M. N. Zakharov, Sacramento, California, 2006).

Christ Himself commanded, “Suffer the little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me” (Matt 19:13-14).<sup>54</sup>

Therefore, Jesus Christ Himself was circumcised in infancy, but then He voluntarily was baptized. Without doubt, He did not baptize the children brought to Him (nor did He command His disciples to baptize them), but rather He blessed them (Matt 19:13-15; Mark 10:13-16; Luke 18:15-17). Consequently, the blessing of children by a minister of God with the laying on of hands is an act established by our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a gracious spiritual seed planted in the souls of infants which gives them an opportunity to grow in faith in Christ the Savior and the Holy Trinity. Christ said about children that the Kingdom of God belongs to them (Matt 19:14; Mark 10:14). This means that infants, by means of church blessing (by example of the Savior blessing children) enter directly into the Universal Church. In the case of an early death they, of course, are already saved. We will note that the children of Baptists do not thus become members of the Baptist church. When they grow up they will have to make a deliberate, adult choice: either to remain in the church of Christ (in the same Universal Church, but already necessarily through baptism and membership in the local congregation), or to reject membership in the local church, by which decision they refuse the Uni-

versal Church which they entered through the church’s blessing in their infancy.

Only when, by God’s mercy, they come to a personal realization of their sins and shed tears of repentance with faith, does the miracle of spiritual birth occur and the sacrament of baptism take place (which are, as we remember, inseparably connected with each other); only then New Testament harmony is brought forth. Otherwise, why is the gospel preached on earth? And if our conscientious critics look at how reverentially and solemnly the blessing of children takes place, by the example of the Lord Himself, in evangelical congregations, and find out what this sacrament means, then they will not repeat the mistaken opinion that the Baptists disregard their children. Is it reasonable, relying on the flesh, to maintain that the Protestant blessing of children in the name of the Holy Trinity is inferior (in the spiritual sense) to the Orthodox baptism of infants in the name of the same triune God?<sup>55</sup> Let us remember that “God has called us to peace” (1 Cor 7:15).

The children of Baptists are usually baptized at the age of consent, by their own desire and with joy, because evangelical churches are on principle antagonistic toward any kind of coercion in matters of faith. Adults take care of children’s needs, and this is necessary to do, but parents can hardly choose for their child his or her future way of life. We pray for our chil-

<sup>54</sup> N. A. Kolesnikov, *Khristianin, znaesh’ li ty...?* 55-56.

<sup>55</sup> The power of God’s name invoked at blessing and baptism (the Trinitarian formula) can be explained by the comparison of a spiritual word with a curse. Someone has noted that we often

underestimate the power of blessing until we are cursed, invoking all conceivable and inconceivable disasters... And then in fear we ask for God’s protection, beginning clearly to realize the great power of the word in this sinful world.

dren and trust in the mercy of God; nevertheless, we cannot bring them to heaven, no matter how much we love them. It is a matter of personal repentance and reconciliation with God of every person, even if he or she was born in a believing family. The Lord decreed that human sinfulness (original sin) is transmitted to children by inheritance, but the righteousness of parents is not inherited. The freedom of the growing generation inevitably has a flip side (otherwise it would not be freedom): the children of Baptists do not always become Baptists; the same can be said about the children of the Orthodox and other Christians. But children who were born in families of Satanists, fortunately, are not obliged to continue the cause of their fathers. And that is why spiritual freedom is truly precious.

Behind the simple principle of voluntary church membership, in essence, stands the differing ecclesiology of the Baptist and Orthodox churches. The Baptists are strongly against having unregenerate people in their congregation (although the latter, of course, still penetrate ev-

erywhere), and it is precisely infant baptism that opens a wide door for those people into the church. The Baptists also take their stand against the mediaeval “territorial” principle of religion (the one to whom the land belongs determines its faith), or the state church, which, as the 2000 year history of the church shows, always did much more harm to Christianity than good. For again, here no small element of fear and compulsion is present and it means there is no place left for Christian freedom.

In conclusion, there is another thought. That baptism is secondary is logical for Western Calvinistic Protestants,<sup>56</sup> but completely illogical for Arminians, which most Russian Baptists consider themselves to be.<sup>57</sup> The sacrament of baptism is also God’s commandment (Matt 28:19) and the reciprocal desire of human beings (Acts 8:36-38). The will of God and human will are voluntarily united (“For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us...” Acts 15:28), manifesting perfect harmony which fills baptism with a genuinely deep and eternal sense.

<sup>56</sup> Perhaps it would be exaggeration, but the essence of the issue is as follows: if, before the foundation of the world, from eternity past, the Lord predestined any person to salvation then whether he was or was not baptized in the church is not a major issue—the most important thing is that God has chosen him.

<sup>57</sup> To be honest, I think that national Baptists in reality are not Arminians at all. This is how the

West has classified us, again by the approximate likeness. Not to be Calvinist is not necessarily to be Arminian. In the Russian context Protestant ideas, under the influence of the Eastern Orthodox tradition (which is, of course, much more ancient than the Dutch Arminius) often change noticeably, which also concerns the matter of soteriology.



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