

Christian baptism: where do we go from here?

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KEY WORDS: baptism, infant baptism, diversity.

The question assumes that we know where we are, where 'here' is. We need to make sure that this is really the case. As I respond to the invitation to turn from historian of church and theology into a didactic and prophetic role, I want to make clear, with all the modesty I can muster, that 'here' is to be found at the end of a careful reading of *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism? An Enquiry at the End of Christendom*. To put it in other words, the departure point for this exercise is the strange history of infant baptism sketched in that book, which inevitably involves parts of the history of believers' baptism.

Although written by someone who still endorses the acceptability of infant baptism (but with an enthusiasm considerably more muted than a generation ago), the book's hopefulness for a more consensual future for Christian baptism rests on the widespread and still spreading recognition, especially on the part of churches that for most of their history have baptized very few persons other than infants, that it is both valid and important to regard faith-baptism, that is, the baptism of individuals responding in their own person to questions about their faith in Jesus Christ, as the norm, in an appropriately qualified sense, of Christian baptism, both in theology and in practice. You are not 'here' unless you have come to terms with this remarkable development of the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, which is truly one of the greatest facts of the modern era about baptism. Coming to terms with it entails recognising that it does not require the rejection of infant baptism, although it is likely to issue in more modest appreciations of that practice in the light of historical and theological re-evaluation.

One of the directions in which we should move – and here I address fellow paedobaptists – will lead us to abandon overargued efforts to prove that infants were baptized in the churches of the New Testament. That in fact they were cannot (so I judge) be ruled out, but the case falls far short of proof, and advocates of baptizing babies are on safer territory in relying on biblical-theological rather than historical grounds. The historical question is not even clarified if the investigation is extended to the writings of the Apostolic Fathers, traditionally viewed as the earliest group of post-New Testament texts. I have recently argued that:

the Apostolic Fathers of themselves barely sustain a picture even of obscurity concerning infant baptism. So far are they from dispersing the shadows of the New Testament that, if one started from the Apostolic Fathers

and not the New Testament, one could scarcely claim that the baptizing of infants was even obscurely in view.¹

At the same time, advocates of exclusive believers' baptism should abandon efforts to trace a thin red line of unbroken continuity of the principled practice of baptizing only believers from the apostolic era to the emergence of Anabaptism in the sixteenth century. They must bring themselves to accept how minimal and rare were challenges to infant baptism during that long period of more than a millennium. To guard against misconceptions that still enjoy some currency, the Donatist Christians of early North Africa baptized the new-born just like the mainstream Catholic Christians of the region. When they re-baptized members of the Catholic church who joined them, this had nothing to do with rejection of infant baptism. When Catholic families became Donatists, all alike, from the youngest to the oldest, were re-baptized.

The way forward, then, must encompass the blocking off of historical excursions which promise false security, in the shared knowledge that the true history of baptism of itself favours dogmatism on neither side of the traditional divide. Although infant baptism held almost unchallenged sway for so many centuries, its universal prevalence cannot be read back into the first century, while at the same time the central liturgical form of services of infant baptism for the best part of two millennia, before and after the Reformation, indirectly disclosed the extraordinarily persistent influence of faith-baptism as the normative pattern.

More important for further progress toward greater rapprochement on baptism will be a serious revisiting of the New Testament witness. Readers of *EQ* may be surprised to learn that renewed biblical study has lain behind some of the significant milestones in recent work on baptism, including the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order document on *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (1982) and the post-Vatican II reconsideration in the Roman Catholic Church leading to the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (from 1972). What is needed now is a programme of Bible study involving participants who start from different baptismal positions, and not least among those Christians who profess to accord a greater authority to Scripture than they comfortably associate with the World Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church. Such a programme might start by listing all the occurrences of the noun 'baptism' and the verb 'baptize' in the New Testament, with the initial aim of determining how many of them refer to the actual water-rite of baptism. Some will be obviously metaphorical, such as Jesus' looking forward to his death as a baptism (Mark 10:38-39, Luke 12:50), others less obviously so, including Paul's portrayal of the Israelites as baptized into Moses (1 Cor. 10:2). There may emerge another category of references about which agreement may not be readily forthcoming: does John the Baptist's declaration that the one who is to come will baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8

1 'The Apostolic Fathers and Infant Baptism: Any Advance on the Obscurity of the New Testament?' in A. F. Gregory and C. M. Tuckett (eds.), *Trajectories through the New Testament and the Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 133.

par.) contain a reference of any kind to the (future) rite of Christian baptism? Or again was the Corinthians' being 'baptized by one Spirit into one body' (1 Cor. 12:13) an experience that happened through ordinary baptism? This last verse may suggest another discrete category, of places where what is spoken of as baptism is a gift or experience of the Spirit distinguishable from water-baptism but symbolised or sealed or even embodied by it.

My purpose at this stage is not to influence the outcome of this exercise, except to stress that the first objective is to ascertain everything said in the New Testament about Christian baptism as an action involving at the very least a baptizer, one or more persons being baptized and water. Yet I do feel bound to sound a cautionary note, lest New Testament statements apparently made about baptism in a straightforward sense be ruled out of account on a priori grounds, such as a preformed conviction that we cannot take at face value declarations such as 1 Peter 3:21, 'baptism now saves you.' This biblical study should ask how many of the texts in question contain explicit guidance that they are to be taken in a symbolic sense only.

What is proposed here is a very basic exercise, bracketing off issues such as the subjects of baptism, that is, the persons baptized or to be baptized. It is all-important that it be undertaken in groups embracing different prior convictions on the bones of traditional baptismal contention. Once this ground-laying work has been done, the conversation might well proceed to ask two questions of the verses and passages about Christian baptism in the New Testament: first, what do they affirm about what God does or has done in or through or as a result of baptism? Secondly, what do they affirm about what human beings do or receive or experience in or through or as a result of baptism? These are admittedly weightier questions, whose answers contribute significantly to the shaping of our doctrine of baptism. Let me again plead that they be addressed without regard to the identity of the subjects of these baptisms, whether they be adults answering for themselves, babies in arms, adults who may have no right to speak in their own name (household slaves?) or children somewhere in between – unless, that is, any New Testament verse is found making different affirmations about different subjects of baptism.

My hope would be that an open-minded Bible study along these lines, shared in by Christians who take the New Testament with the utmost seriousness but who have previously occupied divergent positions around 'the waters that divide', would prove an instructive and even revealing experience, and would lay a healthy basis for a promising discussion capable of fruitful engagement with inherited differences. If this seems utopian, a fanciful lurch into unreality, then we should remind ourselves that the last half-century or so has in fact witnessed a greater meeting of Christian minds on baptism than ever before in the history of the church. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* is one measure of this, as is the considerable number of churches in many different parts of the world which now officially recognize both infant baptism and believers' baptism as 'equivalent alternatives'. These 'dual-practice' churches offer to the Christian parents of new-born children the choice between seeking baptism for them as infants

or waiting for them to seek it for themselves in later years. Further testimony to this wide-ranging recent rapprochement on baptism is to be found in those paedobaptist churches which have revised their orders of service for baptism to make it clear that the correct starting-point is what, for shorthand convenience, we continue to call believers' baptism – rather than infant baptism itself!

So let us not be unhopeful about the prospects for a growing level and extent of agreement on matters baptismal – which may, of course, stop some way short of endorsement of a 'dual-practice' regime, let alone conversion from one to another of the traditional conflicting positions on the subjects of baptism. Discord on this last issue is by no means the only, and perhaps not even the most substantial, challenge to be faced in the quest for a biblical baptismal consensus. I am much more interested in the different baptismal traditions each recovering in their own terms the centrality of baptism to the existence and identity of their several churches than in their coming to an agreement on practice. After all, that agreement might conceivably be bought at the cost of a continued depreciation of baptism itself, which might be the worst of all possible worlds. For myself, I have more in common with an exclusive believers'-baptist who treats baptism as seriously as the New Testament than with a paedobaptist minimizer of its significance.

But what if we fail to surmount age-old disagreements? What if advocates of believers' baptism remain conscientiously unable to regard infant baptism as valid Christian baptism and continue to treat those who once received it as unbaptized? What if many paedobaptists try in vain to discern in the believers' baptisms they have observed anything more than a high-profile act of personal testimony, or are baffled beyond words when members, perhaps even office-bearers, of Baptist churches remain unbaptized for years or even decades?

There are no doubt several ways of responding to such an impasse. The most damaging, in my judgement, is disengagement in the resigned recognition that these issues are intractable, followed by slipping into the conclusion that, given inveterate disputes between parties who each seek to be taught by Scripture, baptism cannot be a matter of primary importance. I defy anyone to conduct the basic scrutiny of the baptismal references in the New Testament recommended above and emerge with the conclusion that baptism was a second-order issue in the apostolic churches. There are on the contrary strong grounds for viewing them as baptismal churches, that is, not only churches which converts entered through baptism but churches which could be repeatedly recalled to their distinctive identity by reference to their baptism. The greatest tragedy of our familiar baptismal divisions is that we allow them to lull us into a gravely unbiblical devaluation of baptism itself. Our disagreements may be of secondary importance, our unreconciled diversity of practice likewise (especially when it comes down to the mode of baptism – sprinkling, immersion, affusion), but it would be a severe affront to New Testament teaching to reckon baptism itself as anything less than fundamental to the church of Jesus Christ.

Consequently it is a solemn matter for one church or body of Christians to decide that it will not recognize another's baptisms, for this is tantamount to

questioning the very character as 'church' of that other body. Given the standard identification of a true church of Christ in the lineage of the Reformation by reference to requisite marks, of which one is the ministry of baptism and the Lord's Supper, it is hard to see how a company of people lacking baptism, according to the estimate of another church, could qualify for acceptance as a church. In reality, the assessment is rarely driven to this drastic verdict. Few Baptist churches in the UK, I would guess, go so far as to unchurch the paedobaptist Church of England or Church of Scotland. In any case since both these churches also baptize some persons each year on profession of faith (for no infant-baptizing church recognizes or practises solely the baptism of the new-born), the issue is more complicated. Nor is it confined to a contemporary dimension, for hardline believers'-baptists may by the force of their own doctrinal logic be consigning vast reaches of the millennium before the Reformation to churchlessness, when infant baptism prevailed almost entirely unchallenged. Martin Luther liked to tease his Anabaptist opponents in the sixteenth century: did they really believe that there had been no baptisms for a thousand years, and hence no church of Jesus Christ? This is more than a clever debating point. It powerfully illustrates how deeply these baptismal controversies cut into the foundations of the Christian church in history.

In tracking where we go from here, we run up against crucial questions about how we evaluate major disagreements of this kind. Can we assign our actual disagreements any theological significance – other than to slang off our opponents as blinded to the truth of Scripture by the devil? At what point may we justifiably conclude that Scripture itself may not be clear enough to prescribe a single resolution? This would *prima facie* conflict with the Reformers' cherished notion of the clarity or perspicuity of Scripture, but only on the proper recipients of baptism, not on its cardinal importance as such. Several of the Reformers worked with the category of *adiaphora* (plural), literally matters of indifference, referring to practices neither commanded nor condemned by Scripture and hence tolerant of variety so long as the true doctrine of the gospel is safeguarded. When as an elder of the Church of Scotland I have been formally asked whether I 'acknowledge the Presbyterian government of this Church to be agreeable to the Word of God', I have never regarded my affirmative answer as a judgement that no other form of church government is similarly agreeable. Indeed, I might be strongly of the view (some of the time!) that Presbyterian polity is decidedly preferable to other ones, without believing it to be mandated by Scripture. Could there be a parallel here to baptism? I am happy to acknowledge infant baptism to be agreeable to the Word of God, without being able to regard it as prescribed by it. Its observance is therefore an *adiaphoron* (singular), a matter on which Christians should be able to tolerate variety in practice and to disagree without breach of fellowship. Integral to this position is a recognition of the Christian seriousness of my brother or sister who either wants to insist on infant baptism (so that having babies baptized would be a clear duty of both parents and the church leadership) or is unable to countenance the practice at all.

Why might this route merit a sympathetic theological hearing? First, I suggest,

because of the impasse so often reached when Christians genuinely attempt to cross-question the New Testament for an answer. Is it faithless to conclude that there is no new light to shine forth from New Testament Scripture on this question? Believing in the unity, entire truthfulness and clarity of Scripture does indeed commit us to an ever-fresh lifelong searching of it until we are brought to a common and more perfect mind on its teaching, but it is certainly arguable that tireless revisiting of the issue of the subjects of baptism may have blinded Christians, especially in the evangelical constituency, to the hugely more obvious message of the fundamental place of baptism in the ordering of the new Christian community.

There is a second reason why we might be justified in favouring on baptism what came to be called in some ecumenical circles 'reconciled diversity'. It is surely the case that lack of agreement on who may be baptized rests essentially not on divergent readings of certain New Testament verses – 1 Corinthians 7:14, the household baptisms in Acts, Jesus' blessings of children, for example – but on a far deeper fault-line among students of the Bible, one which runs through the relationship between the two Testaments. Proponents of the baptism of babies characteristically rely heavily on the unity or continuity between Israel and the church, often but not invariably focussed on the doctrine of God's single covenant with his chosen people. This is an apologetic for infant baptism which has deeper and wider roots than simply a parallel with circumcision, appealing, for example, to the importance of the family as a building block of the people of God. By contrast, the case for believers' baptism has typically been based on the New Testament alone – which is, after all, the only part of the Bible where we encounter Christian baptism. The first Anabaptists' rejection of infant baptism was but one aspect of their wholesale rejection of a comprehensive ordering of church, state and society which found most of its biblical warrants in the economy of Israel rather than in the marginalized minority congregations of the New Testament.

Unresolved disagreements on how to relate the Old Testament to the New are fraught with massive geopolitical implications in the twenty-first century. By comparison baptismal disputes may seem very small beer, although they provide a window into one of the biggest basic issues dividing especially but not solely biblical or evangelical Christians in our time – divisions which the massive growth of the Pentecostal and charismatic church families has made more prominent. In respect of baptism in this context a degree of rapprochement has been long overdue, from both sides. The mainstream Reformers bequeathed a defence of paedobaptism which even in its ablest exponents leaned quite disproportionately on the Old Testament. Believers' baptists are right to demand that the heirs of the Reformers owe them an apologia for infant baptism which unashamedly owns the full-orbed New Testament witness to Christian baptism. In turn devotees of exclusive believers' baptism face sharp questions about the apparent irrelevance of the Abrahamic covenant and the viability of a schema of almost total discontinuity between God's ways of gathering his people in the Old and New dispensations.

But for our purposes as we look for the way forward from here, the major question is whether all progress towards a greater consensus on baptism must be halted until we can together work our way satisfactorily through this much vaster problem. I am convinced that the salience of baptism in New Testament Christianity does not allow us to follow this sequence of engagement. By the same token, the rediscovery of that salience should instruct us not to wait: dare we go on ignoring the plain import of the New Testament's presentation of baptism while we continue debating in time-honoured fashion whether or not infants were included in baptism in the New Testament, aware all the time that beneath this question lurks a far more massive one which we scarcely know how to tackle together? Such considerations lead me to sympathize with moving forward by embracing divergent stances on baptism rather than giving priority to overcoming them. The priority must belong to granting baptism the decisive place it has in apostolic Christianity. Who knows whether by putting first things first, secondary issues may also begin to appear in a fresh light?

Abstract

Today paedobaptists increasingly recognize faith-baptism as the norm of Christian baptism, both in theology and in practice. Equally Baptists must recognize how minimal and rare were challenges to infant baptism prior to the Reformation. What is needed now is a programme of joint Bible study involving participants who start from different baptismal positions. This might lead to greater support for the 'dual-practice' or 'reconciled diversity' approach which acknowledges believers' and infant baptism as 'equivalent alternatives'. But failure to reach agreement must not lead to the relegation of baptism to an unimportant issue. More important than reaching agreement on infant baptism is to grant baptism the decisive place that it has in apostolic Christianity.

Baptism in the New Testament

George R. Beasley-Murray

This classic, comprehensive study begins by investigating the antecedents of Christian baptism. It then surveys the foundation of Christian baptism in the Gospels, its emergence in the book of Acts and its development in the apostolic writings. Following a section relating baptism to New Testament doctrine, a substantial discussion of the significance of infant baptism leads to a briefer discussion of baptismal reform and ecumenism.

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1-84227-300-0 / 229x152mm / 432pp / £24.99

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