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Keith Stanglin
Editor

Michael R. Weed
Founding Editor

M. Todd Hall
Managing Editor

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From the early days of the Restoration Movement, Churches of Christ and Christian Churches distinguished themselves from their near neighbors on the American frontier with a noticeably robust ecclesiology, reflected in, among other things, the theology and practice of baptism. Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott's "high" view of baptism stood out in the context of the Second Great Awakening, wherein salvation often came to be connected to a subjective experience of the Holy Spirit that was externally manifest in ways other than baptism. For evangelists like Charles Finney, someone could respond by approaching the "anxious seat." All of this took place apart from water baptism. Campbell's association of believers' baptism with salvation was denigrated by most evangelicals as "baptismal regeneration" and seen as a regression to salvation by works. In the eyes of many evangelicals today, baptism "for the remission of sins" is still regarded as a false teaching that undermines justification by grace through faith.

Yet not everyone is scandalized by the high view of baptism. Many evangelicals, in fact, are warming up to the teaching, and, in many circles, evangelicals are beginning to say the same thing that Churches of Christ have said all along. This shift is due, in part, to a fresh reading of the New Testament. The efficacy of baptism—or, better, the efficacy of God's work in baptism—is perhaps the clearest ecclesiological doctrine in the New Testament. In addition to the New Testament evidence, there is renewed evangelical interest in patristic resources, and the early church provides unanimous testimony of the indispensability of baptism, summed up in the Nicene Symbol's acknowledgment of "one baptism for remission of sins." The emerging ecumenical consensus, moreover, has favored a similarly high view of baptism, reflected in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Faith and Order report of the World Council of Churches (for quotations, see "Obiter Dicta" in this issue).

During this year of centennial celebration of Austin Graduate School of Theology (founded in 1917), as we are encouraged to look back and look ahead, it is appropriate to examine a topic that has been—and continues to remain—pivotal to the identity and unity of the Restoration Movement. For, despite all the diversity of faith and practice that now characterizes Churches of Christ, the important place of baptism is one of the few identity markers

that most congregations have maintained. For all the attention that has been devoted to the understanding of baptism, there is always more to learn as we seek to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord.

To these ends, we have devoted this issue of *Christian Studies* to the topic of baptism, asking contributors to answer questions such as: What is the sacrament of baptism? How should we think about baptism? How should we practice baptism? How can our theology and practice of baptism be improved? Much of the focus will be not only on what baptism means as a punctiliar moment in time, but also on its meaning as a linear event. Although our churches have been united around passages such as Acts 2:38, there has traditionally been less reflection or consensus regarding what should lead up to baptism and what should follow it. We pray that the reflections on baptism found in these pages will be beneficial to the readers and to the church and will bring glory to God.

Keith D. Stanglin
Editor
stanglin@austingrad.edu

Aspects of Baptismal Symbolism in the New Testament

Jeffrey Peterson

The importance of baptism in the life of the Christian church and the lives of its members does not consist only in its being the fulfillment of biblical command or the imitation of apostolic example. While the virtue of obedience should not be neglected in an age that celebrates individualism and even rebellion against inherited norms, the value of baptism in the life of faith is more deeply appreciated when it is recognized as an act rich in symbolic significance. Rather than mere compliance with a requirement, the baptism of believers is a parable enacted within the Christian community, expressing the founding faith of the church that God's saving purposes prefigured in the Old Testament have now been brought to fruition in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ, and that the lives of believers have been "submerged" in that larger story. This brief survey of baptismal symbolism in the New Testament is offered in the hope that it will encourage further exploration of this perspective on baptism.¹

The most basic symbolism associated with baptism in the New Testament derives from the form of the rite itself, an immersion in water that suggests a bath or cleansing of the person immersed.² The association of the act

¹ The indispensable reference for the ancient Christian practice and understanding of baptism is Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009); on the NT specifically, see 83–198. Among works focusing on the New Testament, I have found especially helpful Lars Hartman, *"Into the Name of the Lord Jesus": Baptism in the Early Church*, Studies of the New Testament and its World (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997).

² On the meaning of *baptizō* and related Greek words, see in addition to the lexica Ferguson's extensive discussion in *Baptism*, 38–59.

of baptism with cleansing is evident in the Gospel passages that discuss Jewish customs of washing before meals (Mark 7:4; Luke 11:38), in which the Greek word *baptizō* is often translated “wash” (cf. NRSV, NIV, ESV, REB). This symbolism of purification is sometimes explicit in reference to the baptismal rite, as when Ananias urges Paul, “Arise and be immersed, and wash away your sins, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16).³ Likewise, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they were “washed ... in the name of the Lord Jesus and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). Elsewhere in the Pauline corpus, baptism is alluded to as a “washing” (*loutron*, Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5).⁴ We may also recognize an allusion to baptism in the invitation to the audience of the letter to the Hebrews to “approach [God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” (Heb 10:22 NRSV).⁵

That baptism as suggesting purification is not more frequently referred to in the NT can perhaps be accounted for by the obviousness of this symbolism; a participant in or observer of the rite could scarcely fail to notice the purificatory aspect of a full ritual bath in water. The one explicit mention of baptism in 1 Peter highlights this symbolism but is difficult to construe precisely (1 Pet 3:21): Is Christian baptism presented as “an appeal to God for a good conscience” (NRSV), or “the answer of a good conscience toward God” (KJV), or “the pledge of a good conscience toward God” (CSB)? Does the “putting off of the filth of the flesh” refer to the “removal of dirt from the body” in general (ESV) or circumcision in particular (cf. Gen 17:11; Lev 19:23 KJV, NJB, and notes to NRSV, NASB, REB)?⁶ If the latter, then 1 Peter closely parallels the characterization of baptism in Colossians as the

³ Except as otherwise indicated, translations of Scripture are the author’s, usually with consultation of at least the NRSV.

⁴ On the baptismal associations in these passages, see Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 543; and the rich if at times speculative comments of Jerome D. Quinn, *The Letter to Titus: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary and an Introduction to Titus, I and II Timothy, The Pastoral Epistles*, Anchor Bible 45 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008 [1974]), 210–26.

⁵ See Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 289.

⁶ See the excellent discussion by Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter: A Commentary on First Peter* Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 266–72.

spiritual “circumcision of the Messiah,” the “stripping off of the body of flesh” initially experienced by Christ in his death and resurrection, in which Christians participate by dying and rising with him in baptism (Col 2:11–13).⁷ In any case, it is clear that the purification involved in Christian baptism is not from physical impurity, but rather has its effect in the spiritual realm.

Rites of purification were ubiquitous in ancient religious practice, Jewish as well as Greco-Roman, and any participant in a rite that involved an immersion bath in the context of interaction with a divine being would readily have understood purification to be involved. The Law of Moses laid down the basic norms for the Jewish rites practiced in the first century, the overarching aim being to respect the holiness of the divine presence honored in the temple and to avoid bringing impurity into proximity to it.⁸ The common interpretation generalized the obligation of one exposed to some sources of impurity to “bathe his [whole] body in water” (Lev 14:9; 15:13, 16) to all instances in which “bathing in water” was required (cf. Lev 14:8–9; 15:5–8, 10–11, 18, 21–22, 27). To facilitate obedience to the command so interpreted, pools with steps facilitating immersion (*miqva’ot*) were cut into bedrock throughout first-century Judea.⁹

This was the milieu in which John “the Immerser” issued his summons to all God’s covenant people to come to the flowing rivers of the Jordan and

⁷ This takes *tou Christou* in the phrase *en tē(i) peritomē(i) tou Christou* (“in the circumcision of the Messiah/Christ,” Col 2:11) as an “objective” genitive, referring to the spiritual circumcision performed on Christ in his death and resurrection and on Christians by their participation therein; this interpretation is supported by the statement closely following that “dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision (literally, ‘the foreskin’) of your flesh, [God] made you alive together with [Christ]” (Col 2:13). The alternative construction of the genitive in v. 12 as “subjective” would understand Christ as the agent of a spiritual operation which releases believers from the burden of the flesh. See further Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 34A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008 [1994]), 318–20.

⁸ For the understanding and practice of purification in ancient Judaism, see E. P. Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992), 214–30. For the ambiguous relationship between impurity and sin, see Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁹ See E. P. Sanders, *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah: Five Studies* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990), esp. 214–27. On the “scores of immersion pools ... found in or around the temple mount” as part of the setting presupposed in Luke’s account of mass baptisms in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41), see Ferguson, *Baptism*, 170.

receive “a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3).¹⁰ Immersion in the Jordan likely evoked the entry into the Land in the days of Israel’s infancy (Josh, chaps. 3–4) and suggested that God was fulfilling his promise of a new exodus and a restoration of his people’s inheritance, a theme notably developed in the book of Isaiah.¹¹ The promise that God would accompany and protect his people when they “pass through the waters ... and ... walk through fire” (Isa 43:2 NRSV) is especially pertinent to the description of John’s preaching (Matt 3:7–12; Luke 3:7–17).

John’s baptism differed from the ordinary washings devout Jews experienced as a one-time purification to prepare for the coming of “one mightier” than John, who would soon “immerse” Israel in the Holy Spirit and purifying fire (Matt 3:11–12; Luke 3:16–17). This likely alludes to the promise that God himself would return to the temple and, “like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap,” would purify its worship and judge his people (Mal 3:1–5 NRSV). Mark’s description of John’s washing as a “baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins” implies what Matthew and Luke make explicit, that John’s washing was offered to cleanse the people of their sins that they might “bear fruits worthy of repentance” in anticipation of the coming fiery judgment of God (Luke 3:7–9; cf. Matt 3:7–10).¹² By water or by fire, Israel would be made pure for God.

The baptism of Jesus by John links John’s baptism with baptism “in the name of Jesus.” Everett Ferguson aptly concludes, “In receiving baptism Jesus identified with the people of Israel to whom John addressed his message

¹⁰ On John’s baptism, see Ferguson, *Baptism*, esp. 84–92. A river was especially appropriate as the site of John’s baptism in view of the use of running water for “the most severe cases of impurity” (Lev 14:5–6, 50–52; 15:13; Num 19:17; and Deut 21:4), as noted by Ferguson (95 n. 55).

¹¹ Mark L. Strauss cites as passages developing this theme Isa. 40:3–5; 41:17–20; 42:14–16; 43:1–3, 14–21; 48:20–21; 49:8–12; 51:9–10; 52:11–12; and 55:12–13 (*The Davidic Messiah in Luke–Acts: The Promise and Its Fulfillment in Lukan Christology*, JSNT Supp 413 [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995], 285–86). As John and his contemporaries read the book of Isaiah as a unity—and indeed, the Scriptures in their entirety—one might also cite in this connection Isa 11:11–16; Jer 23:1–8; 31:1–14 (cf. J. J. M. Roberts, *First Isaiah: A Commentary* Hermeneia [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015], 189; James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as it was at the Start of the Common Era* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1998], 15–18).

¹² Luke suggests that John was especially concerned with the use of possessions in ways that honored God and aided one’s neighbor (Luke 3:10–14).

and started on a path that led to the cross (Matt. 16:21–23). He also set an example of obedience for others.”¹³ Purification from sins, dedication to the holy God, and vindication in his coming judgment are motifs that baptism in the name of Jesus shared with John’s baptism. Thus, Paul reminds the Corinthians that in their baptism they were “washed,” “sanctified,” and “justified” (1 Cor 6:11). Converts to the gospel were cleansed of moral defilement, set apart from the world and dedicated to God as his special possession, and declared upright before God “in the name of Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”¹⁴

What most clearly distinguished John’s baptism from the baptism that Christians practiced was the invocation of the name of Jesus. The book of Acts characteristically depicts baptism as practiced “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” beginning with Peter’s invitation on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:28; cf. 8:12; 10:48; 19:5; cf. 22:16). Paul’s ironic question to his own enthusiasts in Corinth, “Were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor 1:13) confirms that this was the baptismal practice in the Pauline mission. Luke and Paul also agree in understanding this practice of baptism in light of the prophecy of Joel that at the time when God’s Spirit is poured out on all flesh (either in anticipation of or in conjunction with “the great and terrible day of the Lord”), “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Joel 2:28–32). Luke quotes the entire prophetic passage in his report of Peter’s Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:16–21), and Paul quotes its climactic verse at the conclusion of his argument from Scripture that the Law and the prophets attest the righteousness from God revealed through the trust of Christ (Rom 10:5–13; cf. 1:2; 3:21–22).

Paul’s discussion in Romans 10 likely shows us at least part of what was involved in the practice. Having heard “the word of faith that we proclaim”

¹³ Ferguson, *Baptism*, 102. For the difficulties raised for Jesus’ early followers by the narrative of his baptism by John, see Ferguson, 99–103; Hartman, “*Into the Name of the Lord Jesus*,” 21–27.

¹⁴ The recollection in 1 Cor 6:11 of the Corinthians’ conversion in terms of “justification” and the presupposition that they will recognize their experience recounted in those terms stands against the proposal that for Paul justification was a purely polemical doctrine, articulated only in controversy with Judaizing teachers (so, e.g., Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978]).

(Rom 10:8) and come to believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead, converts acclaimed Jesus as Lord (Rom 10:9) and so were admitted to the fellowship of the saved (Rom 10:13). Paul's similar language in the recollection of baptism ("washed ... in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God," 1 Cor 6:11) suggests that the acknowledgment of Jesus as Lord, often repeated in the worship of the church (cf. 1 Cor 12:3; 16:22–23; Phil 2:11), was initially made at one's baptism. Luke attests the same practice in his report that Ananias urged Saul to receive baptism and cleansing from his sins while "calling on [Jesus'] name" (Acts 22:16).

Lars Hartman has effectively questioned the proposal that the characterization of baptism as "in/into the name of the Lord Jesus" was derived from banking practice and depicted the baptized as transferred into Jesus' possession, on analogy with a sum of money transferred into a new owner's account. He suggests rather that the phrase expresses the more general understanding of the baptismal rite as deriving its significance from the presence of the Lord Jesus and the believers' interaction with him.¹⁵ This understanding of baptism "in the name of the Lord Jesus" is the context in which Paul's description of baptism as "into Christ [Jesus]" (Gal 3:27; Rom 6:3) is best understood, as an abbreviated and somewhat more specific formulation of the same general perspective.¹⁶ To acknowledge Jesus the crucified Messiah as "Lord" or "Master" (Greek *kyrios*) is to accept a new identity as his servant and to affirm that the shape and course of one's life now lay wholly within his power. Baptism thus brings its recipient into the sphere of Christ's lordship and to a new existence "in Christ," an expression Paul uses frequently to express the new quality of life granted to those who have been baptized (cf. Rom 6:11; Gal 3:28), "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor 1:2; cf. 6:11). The imagery of being "clothed with Christ" (Gal 3:27; Eph 4:20–24; Col 3:9–11; cf. Rom 13:13–14) conveys much the same significance as that of being "immersed into Christ," the believers' identity in either case being "covered over" by Christ's, imagery also applied to shaping Christian morals.¹⁷

¹⁵ See Hartman, "Into the Name of the Lord Jesus," 37–50.

¹⁶ See Hartman, "Into the Name of the Lord Jesus," 43 and n. 31.

¹⁷ See Michael B. Thompson, *Clothed with Christ: The Example and Teaching of Jesus in Romans 12.1–15.13* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011 [1991]).

While baptism is necessarily experienced individually, the common reception of it “in the name of the Lord Jesus” unites believers, a point on which Paul lays considerable stress. “By one Spirit we were all plunged into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slave or free, and were all inundated by the one Spirit,” Paul reminds the Corinthians (1 Cor 12:13), before articulating the image of the church as the body of Christ.¹⁸ That such unification was the common understanding of the baptismal rite, and not an idea Paul first conceived in his effort to counteract Corinthian divisiveness, is suggested by Gal 3:28, in which Paul recalls faith in Christ and baptism into him as having united the Galatians as “one person in Christ” (REB, translating *heis ... en Christō[z] Iēsou*). The inclusion of “one baptism” (Eph 4:5) as one of the seven hallmarks of the church’s unity is surely in the spirit of the Pauline understanding of the significance of baptism.

Indeed, through baptism into Christ, Gentiles, formerly “aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise” (Eph 2:12), have now been granted a common heritage with Paul and other Jewish Christians. In 1 Corinthians 10, although writing to converts of predominantly Gentile background (cf. 1 Cor 12:2), Paul develops a parallel between the experience of those who have been baptized into Christ and “our fathers,” the Hebrews who passed through the Red Sea beneath an enveloping cloud and so were “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea” (1 Cor 10:1–4). Just as God liberated the children of Israel in the exodus from Egypt and made a covenant of nationhood with them, formalized at Sinai, so Christians have been led out of bondage to sin and death through baptism and fed with food and drink provided by God (1 Cor 10:3–4). Paul develops this parallel so as to emphasize the exclusive devotion to God that a person embraces by acknowledging God’s authority in baptism (1 Cor 10:5–11).

Paul presses on the Romans the point that baptism “into Christ Jesus” means specifically baptism “into his death” (Rom 6:3). In developing this symbolism, Paul could draw on Old Testament passages in which a sufferer complains to God that (e.g.) “all your waves and your billows have gone over me” (Ps 42:7 NRSV; cf. Lam 3:53–55) and cries out for “deliverance from

¹⁸ The translation is inspired by Hartman’s translation “We all had the one Spirit poured over us” for the phrase usually rendered along the lines of “We were all made to drink of the one Spirit” (“*Into the Name of the Lord Jesus,*” 67).

the deep waters” (Ps 69:14–15 NRSV). Perhaps especially suggestive in this connection is the opening of the prayer of Jonah (Jon 2:2–6):

I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me;
 out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.
 You cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas,
 and the flood surrounded me; all your waves and your bil-
 lows passed over me.
 Then I said, “I am driven away from your sight;
 how shall I look again upon your holy temple?”
 The waters closed in over me; the deep surrounded me;
 weeds were wrapped around my head at the roots of the moun-
 tains.
 I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me forever;
 yet you brought up my life from the Pit, O Lord my God.
 (NRSV)

The psalm, which exhibits both a general fit with its narrative context and independence in details, pictures descent into death (“the belly of Sheol”) as being enveloped by the waters that surround the earth (“the deep”), from which God delivers the sufferer; this pattern fits the psalm to serve as an evocative statement of the experience of Jesus in his death and resurrection, which baptism re-enacts for believers (cf. Matt 12:40; Luke 11:30).¹⁹ The same general understanding of baptism may be observed in Jesus’ discussion with his disciples of “the baptism with which I am baptized,” which they will come to share (Mark 10:38–39).²⁰

It is only in virtue of the resurrection of Christ that believers can now call on Jesus as Lord and be introduced into the new reality defined by his sovereignty. As his death was the necessary precondition for his resurrection, so

¹⁹ On the composition of Jonah chap. 2 and its relation to the surrounding narrative, see, e.g., Hans Walter Wolff, *Obadiah and Jonah: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 128–29. Graydon F. Snyder, while finding in the Jonah story only the general theme of “deliverance” and neglecting its specific association with Jesus’ death and resurrection, observes that the story of Jonah accounts for 60 percent of all subjects treated in early Christian art, and 72 percent of those derived from the OT (“Art and Architecture: Early Christian Art,” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 1.459).

²⁰ As Joel Marcus observes, Jesus speaks here “of being overwhelmed by the flood of death and of his disciples going down with him” (*Mark 8–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 27A [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009], 752).

our eventual participation in Christ's resurrection (Rom 6:5), as well as our present participation in the "newness of life" that the risen Lord enables (Rom 6:4), require that we have first become partakers in Christ's death (Rom 6:3–4), "crucified together with [him]" (Rom 6:6). In Colossians, any reticence to speak of Christians as not only having died with Christ but also having been raised with him is cast aside, and Christians are described as both dying and rising with Christ (Col 2:11–13; 2:20; 3:1–3). As a result, Christians are called even now to "set [our] minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col 3:2), even though the fullness of our new life in Christ will only become apparent when he is revealed (Col 3:4).

This association between baptism and resurrection reminds us that in addition to being seen as cleansing and as threatening, water is of course also vivifying; indeed, it is indispensable for life (as the ancients were more acutely aware than moderns, until there is an interruption in the flow of water to our homes). It is not surprising, then, that we also find baptism presented in terms of new creation (2 Cor 5:17, where baptism "into Christ" is implicit in the consideration of a person "in Christ") and new birth, or "birth from above" (John 3:3–5). This last image is an element of the rich baptismal symbolism of water as an agent of life in the Gospel according to John.²¹

As an enacted parable of the redemption that God has accomplished in Christ, baptism shows Christians how we have been purified by God for life in his presence and dedicated to his service. It dramatically exhibits for us the summons to share in the death of Christ to which we have responded and the new life God pours over us with the gift of his Spirit. If we seek to renew the life of the church, there is no better place to begin than to return to the baptismal waters in which we were made partakers of the grace of Christ and to drink deeply of what they teach.

²¹ Space precludes an adequate treatment here; see C. K. Barrett, *Gospel according to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*, 2nd ed. (London: SPCK, 1978), 82–84. Barrett makes the helpful observation (12) that the baptismal image of the "water of life" and the eucharistic image of the "bread of life" are complementary developments of the theme of "life" introduced in the Gospel's prologue (John 1:4). See also Craig R. Koester, *Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel: Meaning, Mystery, Community*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 175–206.

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Finding Words to Nourish: “Milk” and “Solid Food” in Earliest Christianity and Today

Daniel Austin Napier

A thorough, biblical study of baptism must attend to the role of teaching in preparing candidates. While one may debate the amount and specific elements of pre-baptismal instruction in very early Christianity, it seems indubitable that significant teaching accompanied baptism.

Baptism initiated the convert into a life of learning. The early church’s self-ascriptions, as depicted in Acts, indicate the role of teaching in their communities. Followers of the risen Jesus self-labeled as adherents of “the Way”¹ or simply as “students” (i.e. disciples).² The one word designation “student” was likely shorthand for “student(s) of the Lord” (9:1). To join the church was to join a community devoted to learning and living within Jesus’ teachings.

In view of early Christian practice, C.S. Lewis’ words to modern seekers are apropos. “God is no fonder of intellectual slackers than of any other slackers. If you are thinking of becoming a Christian, I warn you, you are embarking on something which is going to take the whole of you, brains and all. But, fortunately, it works the other way around. Anyone who is honestly trying to be a Christian will soon find his intelligence being sharpened: one of the reasons why it needs no special education to be a Christian is that Christianity is an education itself.”³

¹ Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22.

² Acts 6:1, 7; 9:1, 10, 19, 25–26, 38; 11:26, 29; 13:52; 14:20, 22, 28; 15:10; 16:1; 18:23, 27; 19:1, 9, 30; 20:1, 30; 21:4, 16.

³ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Harper One, 1980), 78.

Given the central role of teaching and learning in earliest Christianity, one might be surprised to observe its practice in contemporary congregations.

Educational institutions, if they are doing their job, structure themselves to facilitate ever increasing levels of competence. Growth in competence requires ascending levels of instruction—discernable stages of learning and practice. Grade levels in primary, secondary, and high schools as well as escalating course numbers and prerequisites for university courses illustrate the assumption of growing competence. Even sporting programs and martial arts dojos have specific classes for people at different levels of development.

Where are the levels of instruction found among Jesus' contemporary students? In my experience, few congregations offer differing classes based on levels of spiritual maturity. The same adult bible class and sermon is expected to feed the seeker, the young convert, and the wizened follower of many decades. One might ask what belief should be inferred from this practice. Could the contemporary church be the only educational institution whose teaching practices assume a perpetual failure to improve?

The ancient church, in contrast, expected progression in discipleship and scaled her teaching to match. The writings of the New Testament indicate this was so from her earliest days.

If asked to categorize their teaching practices, the earliest followers of Jesus would not use the terms common today. "Theology" was a word they avoided.⁴ While early Christians often self-identified as a "philosophy", the

⁴ "Theology," as a label for a form of teaching, had pagan connotations in the early centuries. Three forms of "theology" were commonly recognized by the ancients: mythic, physical, and political. Mythic or poetic theology was story-telling about the gods. Homer and Hesiod were theologians in this sense. Physical or natural theology referred to the gods as personifications of the forces of nature. Civic or public theology, as the Stoics described it from Panaetius of Rhodes onward, was the attribution of divine qualities either to rulers, such as the Caesar, or civic aim, such as "Justice" and "Peace," in order to solidify a social group. Tertullian and Augustine of Hippo, both of whom cite Varro, are primary sources of testimonia for these views. See Tertullian, *ad Nationes* 2.1ff and Augustine, *City of God* 4.24–27; 6.12, etc. In addition to these three, we might note that Aristotle used the word to designate one of the three branches of speculative philosophy: mathematics, physics, and theology (*Metaphysics* 6.1). In this sense, theology designated his theory of being *qua* being as developed in

term didn't name a form of discourse or instruction offered.⁵ Philosophy referred to a coherent and comprehensive way of living, not to a subject matter in a curriculum.⁶

Together with generic terms such as “teaching,” “exhortation,” “encouragement,” “preaching,” and “evangelizing,”⁷ early Christians employed a particularly telling metaphor complex to name levels of instruction. That complex of metaphors is the focus of this article.

The milk and chewable or solid food metaphor,⁸ while not ubiquitous in the New Testament, does occur in multiple authors (1 Cor 3:2 and Heb 5:12. Milk also occurs in 1 Pet 2:2 without a contrast to solid foods). Moreover, an examination unbiased toward an ideology of original “diversity” or “pluriformity” in earliest Christianity shows, I think, substantial coherence of meaning in the metaphor's use. At least that will be the direction of my argument.

It is true that ancient philosophers commonly used metaphors of eating and digesting to name aspects of the learning process. Their metaphor of learning or reading as eating was built upon a general parallelism between

Metaphysics book 12. The Stoics included Aristotle's usage in their category of “physical theology,” but it probably should be counted as a fourth usage.

⁵ See chs. 1 and 4 of Pierre Hadot and Arnold I. Davidson, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995).

⁶ To calibrate one's understanding of ancient philosophy as ways of living, see Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2002); Hadot and Davidson, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*; Martha Craven Nussbaum, “The Therapy of Desire in Hellenistic Ethics,” in *Antike Philosophie Verstehen = Understanding Ancient Philosophy*, ed. Marcel van Ackeren and Jörn Müller (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006); Martha Craven Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Martin Classical Lectures (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994). Most recently, John M. Cooper, *Pursuits of Wisdom: Six Ways of Life in Ancient Philosophy from Socrates to Plotinus* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2013) provides a needed corrective to a homogenizing tendency in Hadot.

⁷ For an overview of some relevant speech types and their components, see Abraham J. Malherbe, *Moral Exhortation: A Greco-Roman Sourcebook*, Library of Early Christianity, 1st ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986).

⁸ Paul uses the term “chewables” and the Hebrews writer uses the phrase “solid food.” I consider them to be referring to the same thing. In this article, I'll use “chewables” when referring to Paul's text and “solid food” when the Hebrews writer is in focus.

body and soul. Just as the body requires food to acquire substance, so the soul requires truth to grow.⁹

Often the specific focus, for the philosophers, was reading. The metaphor supplied an ethics of literary consumption. One could become gluttonous in devouring more texts than one could mentally assimilate. The result is intellectual indigestion, or confusion. Unrestrained gorging might result in the student “vomiting” the hastily ingested speech forms without any sign of digestion.¹⁰ In English we have a word for this condition. We call such a student a “sophomore” or “wise-fool.” He eagerly and capably regurgitates elevated sentences, but he does not really know what he is talking about. The verbal formulae might be correct, but he lacks an appropriate basis in thought and experience to deal with their subject matter.

The early Christians’ milk/solid food distinction clearly bears a kinship to the philosophical commonplace of learning as nutrition.¹¹ Nonetheless, it is not identical with anything found in the pagan philosophers.¹² It operates

⁹ For a few examples of the truth-as-nourishment commonplace, see Plato *Phaedrus* 247b-e; Epictetus *Discourses* 1.26.15–17; 2.9.17–19; *Encheiridion* 46; Marcus Aurelius *Meditations* 10.31.2. A related metaphor depicts the philosopher as physician of the soul and philosophical arguments as medicine, diet, surgery, or cautery. For examples see Plato *Gorgias* 462bff; Seneca *Epistles* 22.1; 27.1; 40.5; 50.4; 64.8; 72.5–6; 94.24; 95.29.

¹⁰ Epictetus *Discourses* 1.26.15–17

¹¹ For secondary discussions of New Testament usage of the milk and meat metaphor, see James Thompson, “The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 13 (1982): 17–40; Karen H. Jobes, “Got Milk? Septuagint Psalm 33 and the Interpretation of I Peter 2:1–3,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 63 (2002): 1–14 offers a counter-intuitive, and ultimately unconvincing, perspective that milk is God’s grace generically, not teaching; Gail Corrington, “The Milk of Salvation: Redemption by the Mother in Late Antiquity and Early Christianity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 82, no. 4 (1989): 393–420 argues for a liturgical context with a background in the Isis mystery cult, so also Gail Paterson Corrington, *Her Image of Salvation: Female Saviors and Formative Christianity* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 89–98; Philip Tite, “Nurslings, Milk and Moral Development in the Greco-Roman Context: A Reappraisal of the Paraenetic Utilization of Metaphor in 1 Peter 2.1–3,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 31 no. 4 (2009): 371–400; for an adjacent metaphor without explicit discussion of milk cf. Abraham J. Malherbe, “‘Gentle as a Nurse’: The Cynic Background to I Thess II,” *Novum Testamentum*, 12 no. 2 (1970): 203–17.

¹² The Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, is the nearest of kin among non-Christian writers. He utilized a contrast between milk and wheaten bread to describe

within a larger matrix of cognate metaphors, which has no parallel among the philosophic schools. As such, the specific distinction between milk and chewable food seems to carry a distinct range of meanings within the Jesus movement.¹³

What elements comprise the broader metaphor complex within which milk and chewable food find their meaning? The first element goes back, in the early church's memories, to Jesus' own teachings. In his parables, Jesus identified his message of the kingdom as "seed." The same words (*sperma*, *spora*, and cognate verbs) can be used either in a horticultural context or in a biological context. Ancients did not draw a sharp line between the tiny bits of matter that initiated plant life and animal life.

In the parables of the synoptic gospels Jesus employs horticultural imagery.¹⁴ The "seed" falls on various types of soil, which determines its reception and effect. Likewise, Jesus' message will find varied reception and effect depending on what type of heart it encounters. Here the seed produces a new form of botanical life. Yet the botanical seed metaphor explicitly refers to the beginnings of a new kind of human life.

The same words function in metaphorically biological contexts. Some early Jesus followers, also referring to the production of a new type of life from God's word, employed the metaphor of "seed" as that which produces an embryo or the beginnings of a new body.¹⁵ By extending the metaphor, evangelizing could be described metaphorically as a "begetting" or "generating" of a new life.¹⁶ A person in whom this new form of life had been engen-

appropriate training in the cycle of studies for the immature soul before moving on to the "congealed and costly food" of philosophy (*On Husbandry* 9; *On Mating with the Preliminary Studies* 19; *Every Good Man in Free* 160). Otherwise, no explicit usage of the distinction can be located among the philosophers. Epictetus characteristically reproaches his students for refusing to be weaned and whining for their nanny instead of growing up (*Discourses* 2.16.39; 3.24.9), but it was a vituperative rhetorical move. The Stoics never developed an explicit distinction between milk and solid food as forms of teaching.

¹³ Pace James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979) and his numerous echoers.

¹⁴ Mark 4:1–20; 26–32; Matt 13:3–35; Luke 8:4–15.

¹⁵ 1 Pet 1:23; 1 John 3:9.

¹⁶ 1 Cor 4:15; Phm 10.

dered has been “sired again” or “sired from above.”¹⁷ The same root word (*gennaō*) could mean either “to birth” or “to beget, sire”¹⁸ depending on whether the subject is a male or female.¹⁹ In the context of John’s gospel, the one who begets is God the Father and thus metaphorically masculine. Attentive readers of John’s gospel will have been alerted at the beginning to this masculine sense of begetting. For the true light gives to believers the right to become children of God. Such are begotten, not from blood nor from the desire of the flesh nor from the choice of a male, but from God (John 1:12–13).

It’s important, pastorally, to distinguish the notion of “begetting” or “generating” from “being born.” Here is the reason. We live at the mercy of our ideas. And our language naturally calibrates our expectations. When we use the common language of “born again”, our imaginations conjure a fairly short, intense period of emergence. Birth typically lasts from a few hours to perhaps a full day. On the other hand, when one speaks of being generated from above we naturally expect a longer, more involved process of growth and transformation. Conversion imagined as “being born again” conjures a quick change—perhaps a “road to Damascus” sort of experience. Conversion understood as “being generated from above” prepares a person for what might be a year of awkward, searching, incremental morphing into a new life.

Of course, neither generation nor birth are the endpoint of the metaphor complex. Once a newly begotten life comes to term, he or she enters the world as an infant and gradually grows to full maturity. The spiritual pregnancy issues in a life that initially requires specially adapted spiritual and moral nutrition to grow.²⁰ Different forms of nutrition are required for each stage.

¹⁷ John 3:1–8; 1 Pet 1:3, 23.

¹⁸ According to Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon. With a Revised Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 344, this verb is used “mostly of the father.”

¹⁹ Nicodemus misunderstands Jesus in John 3 as meaning “born again.” Commentators often note the ambiguity of the “*anōthen*” particle. It could mean either “again” or “from above.” However, a similar ambiguity resides in the word *gennaō*. Nicodemus is doubly confused.

²⁰ 1 Cor 3:1–3; Heb 5:11–14; 1 Pet 2:1–3; see also *Odes of Solomon* 19.

With this larger matrix of metaphors in view, we are in a good position to explore the significance of the milk/chewable food distinction and its referents.

Before we launch into that exploration, however, please consider how this matrix naturally creates expectations of a layered, gradual process of conversion and spiritual maturation. The goal is not merely to be “born again” but to grow up. I hope it will not be considered uncharitable to call attention to a trend of the last several decades. We currently are seeing the results of many thousands who have been “born again” but harbor no intention of every growing into the full stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13). In earliest Christianity, a longer, fuller transformation was expected. A whole life is in view—a new form of human existence that directly emerges from Jesus’ teaching.

The Content of “Milk”: Catechetical or Peri-Baptismal Teaching

While several New Testament writers refer to “milk” and the need of their hearers for “milk”, the content of this teaching is left implicit, with one exception. The Hebrews writer provides a brief catalog of the topics included in the “milk” (6:1–2). Ironically, we only have this catalog because he wanted to gesture toward what he proposed to surpass in his own teaching (6:3). Nonetheless, the catalog is instructive because it probably contains the basic curriculum for early Christian catechesis as the Hebrews writer knew it.

Four topics are listed as equivalent to the milk. The topical order may be indicative of instructional sequence. In other words, we might have an answer to the following question. Suppose a first century “seeker” inquired concerning the church’s faith. What would be the content and order of his or her initial round of instruction? I will expound the list from that perspective.

- 1) Elementary Teaching about Christ (Heb 6:1).

A serious inquirer into the church’s faith would first be given a basic summary of Jesus’ story as embodying the fulfillment of messianic hopes. For anyone from a Gentile background, this would require a significant overview of God’s prior interaction with Israel. Later catechists emphasize the need to provide a concise narrative frame for Jesus’ story that would include creation and primal rebellion, the flood and the division of the nations, the election of

Abraham, the Exodus and giving of Torah, the choice of David, the prophetic testimony, the Exile and return of the Jews.²¹

The organizing focus, however, would be on the life-events, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. To put this in words common to the rest of the New Testament, but strangely sparse in Hebrews (only 4:2, 6), the gospel would be preached. For the sake of simplicity, one could think of the gospel as all the stuff that ends up in the gospels. Those stories of Jesus *are* the gospel in earliest Christianity.²² Jesus' story formed a foundation for conversion in the earliest church.

2) The Foundation of Moral Exhortation (Heb 6:1)

The Hebrews writer briefly gestures toward the “foundation of repentance from dead deeds and of reliance upon God.” Too often our translations assimilate this phrase (*metanoiās apo nekron ergōn*) to a quasi-Pauline (really Lutheran) theology of freedom from “works of the law.” But the Hebrews writer has something different in mind. “Dead deeds” are the death-dealing practices of immoral and idolatrous living.²³ This was a staple of Second Temple Jewish apologetic as well as early Christian proclamation (e.g., Wis 12:2; 1 Thess 1:9–10; Acts 14:15–18; 17:30–31; Eph 2:1–6).

²¹ Two primary texts are especially helpful for reconstructing this dimension of early Christian catechesis. The summary of scriptural meta-narrative found in Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), provides a window into the sort of doctrinal and narrative instruction delivered during this stage. Augustine's examples of the first catechetical lessons in Augustine, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, The Augustine Series (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 2006) indicates this emphasis continues into the early fifth century.

²² This is true even for Paul. When he introduces himself to the Romans, a church he didn't found, Paul's first move is to provide a summary statement of his gospel: “concerning his son who was born from the seed of David according to the flesh and designated son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 1:3–4). If one were to ask, “how could one gesture toward the whole content of the gospel narratives in a sentence?” Paul's statement would be hard to improve upon. In essence, Paul provides the book-ends to stand for the whole. The gospel is all the stories we tell beginning with Jesus' lineage and culminating in his resurrection from the dead. For accounts of synoptic traditions in Paul, see David L. Dungan, *The Sayings of Jesus in the Churches of Paul: The Use of the Synoptic Tradition in the Regulation of Early Church Life* (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1971); and more recently, chapter 5 of David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011).

²³ James Thompson, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 133.

The basic structure of moral exhortation was a “two ways” approach. (In other words, an exhortation offering a choice between the way of life and the way of death).²⁴ Negatively, the seeker learned to turn from deeds that issue in death. Reliance upon idols, which are empty, futile things, produced stupidity and death. The unfettered license of ordinary gentile life had to be renounced. Positively, this involved a move toward increasing trust or reliance upon God. By learning to rely upon the living God, converts discovered a new form of life.

3) Basic Teachings about Community Practices (Heb 6:2a)

Converts also needed to learn how to live together while engaging in shared communal practices. This stage of teaching involved providing basic coordinates and rationales for that community.

Among the foundational teachings were those “concerning immersions and laying on of hands.” The plural “immersions” probably implies that teaching followed a compare and contrast approach. Baptism in the name of Jesus, to be properly understood, could not be just another immersion. It was of a different order than the repeated ablutions practiced for ceremonial cleansing by the Pharisees and the emergent rabbinic movement²⁵ and by the disciples of John (see Acts 18:24–26). Those entering community life with Jesus’ people needed to grasp the distinctiveness of baptism into his name.²⁶

The “laying on of hands” has two possible referents. The laying on of hands could have been a part of the baptismal initiation that symbolized the conferral of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 8:14–17; 19:5–6). The more likely reference in this context, however, is to a rite of commissioning and fortification for ministry (1 Tim. 4:14; 5:22; 2 Tim. 1:6), for which there is precedent in the Torah. For instance, Moses lays hands upon Joshua in order to appoint him (Num 27:15–23; Deut. 34:9). This second reading seems likely since the

²⁴ For examples of two-ways exhortations prior to the Jesus movement, see Deut 11:26–28; 28:1–68; Jer 21:8ff; 1QS 3.13–4.26. For examples within the Jesus movement, see Matt 7:24–27; *Didache*; *Epistle of Barnabas*; *Doctrina Apostolorum*.

²⁵ For a quick survey of Second Temple Jewish and early rabbinic practices of immersion, see Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 60–82.

²⁶ Lars Hartman, “*Into the Name of the Lord Jesus*”: *Baptism in the Early Church* (Enskede: TPB, 2003) provides a sound analysis of the distinctives.

Hebrews writer addresses those who have recently suffered expulsion from the synagogue. In such a tense moment, he highlights differences between the two movements. The “laying on of hands” for appointment to service would be such a point of distinction. Despite retaining the name “*semikhah*” (lit. *laying on [of hands]*) for their ordination ceremony, the synagogue eventually ceased the physical laying on of hands and ordained rabbis by proclamation. The most likely reason was to intentionally distinguish themselves from the Jesus movement’s practice.²⁷ This rite of commissioning would have invoked the Holy Spirit to supply the strength to serve (see Deut. 34:9).

Even on the front end of personal commitment, converts needed to understand the range of roles exercised and empowered within the community. This provided them a map for communal life at its entrance. As such, these two rites stood for the basic structure of community life within the early church.

There is practical wisdom in this element of the catechism. New converts can find church life bewildering. If this orientation to communal structures were not supplied formally, it would certainly be required informally or the lack would be felt as communal friction.

4) Bare Essentials of Eschatology (Heb 6:2b)

Finally, the seeker would receive teachings concerning “resurrection of the dead ones and eternal judgment.” These are the most basic elements of Christian expectation concerning the world to come. Not only do these expectations emerge seamlessly from the gospel narratives, they also corroborate the resolve instilled through moral exhortation.

Indeed, catechists of later centuries will remark on the moral stimulus which genuine belief in a coming judgment supplies to the convert.²⁸ While we find substantial overlap of content between ethical exhortation in the philosophic schools and in early Christian sources, the results of Christian

²⁷ Philip S. Alexander, “Jewish Believers in Early Rabbinic Literature (2d to 5th Centuries),” in *Jewish Believers in Jesus: The Early Centuries*, ed. Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalik (Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson, 2007), 659–709 provides a thorough study of a broad-based rabbinic program of revising synagogue practice in order to dissociate Jewish Jesus-followers. This includes their alteration of the *semikhah* ceremony (704–6).

²⁸ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.38; 3.57; 3.67–69; 4.26; 4.53; 7.35.

moral exhortation were much more transformative. Why? According to early Christian thinkers, the difference could largely be explained by the distinctive role of eschatology. Although other philosophers preached moral truths, they didn't have the power to consistently change their behavior because they lacked a broader belief in the judgment to come and the resurrection of the body.²⁹ Solid hope fuels moral transformation.

How Common is this Curriculum of “Milk”?

This catechetical synopsis might be quite widespread in early Christianity. Of course, we cannot *demonstrate* the claim. By the nature of the case, any statement on the matter will be partially speculative. We can only infer from a handful of texts. Nonetheless, since nature—as well as the scholarly imagination—abhors a vacuum, I would submit that supposing continuity seems at least as plausible as assuming radical diversity.³⁰ In fact, if the order of the list in Hebrews 6:1–2 were taken to indicate a rough sequence of initial teaching common to early Christian communities, other scenarios might be seen as corroborating.

For instance, consider the interrupted catechism of the Thessalonians and the content of Paul's subsequent teaching letters to them. 1 Thessalonians assumes that Paul's readers have heard the gospel and been introduced to Jesus “who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess 1:10). By way of reminder, Paul emphasizes the moral exhortation already delivered (4:1–10a). The new information he supplies relates primarily to the last two categories. His converts need some clarification concerning communal order—how to work in order to help others (4:10b–12) and behavior within the assembly (5:12–22). But the final category seems to be mostly unknown to the Thessalonians. They know Jesus is returning (1:10), but they don't know that his followers who die beforehand will be raised (4:13ff). Why this particular mix of things known and unknown to the Thessalonians? Paul was run from town after perhaps little more than a couple weeks and certainly less than a month (three Sabbaths, Acts 17:2). His initial teaching was curtailed by his flight. If the order of teachings in Hebrews 6:1–2 were standard early Chris-

²⁹ Origen, *Contra Celsum* 3.67–69; 4.53; and Augustine, *De vera religione* 1.1–4.7.

³⁰ Alfred Seeberg, *Der Katechismus Der Urchristenheit* (Leipzig: A. Deichert), 1903.

tian practice, the specific foci of 1 Thessalonians would be predictable topics to complete a disrupted catechism.³¹

The Intended Effect of “Milk”: Personal Moral Formation

Another point of agreement across authors in the New Testament concerns the criteria for advancing from “milk” teachings to those instructions known as “chewable” or “solid food.” Before pointing to the texts, I often ask my classes to ponder what criterion they would offer. How does one know that someone is prepared for a more advanced course of study in the Way? Typically, we assume the best indicator would be the ability to pass some test of content comprehension. However, in this our aim would diverge from the New Testament writers.

In both the Hebrews writer and Paul, the primary criterion for advancement is moral formation. Here the New Testament writers’ understanding of the goal of teaching is much closer to the ancient philosophers than to our modern notions of educational progress.³² For the Hebrews writer, milk is needed for anyone who is inexperienced in making sense of righteousness (5:13). The moral novice needs the catechetical curriculum with its focus on moral exhortation. More advanced study might be damaging so long as this foundation is lacking. Solid food is appropriate for those who easily discern good and bad because skilled perception has become second nature—habit (5:14). In other words, the Hebrew writer would expect daily practice, as guided by the catechetical “milk”, to produce a person whose habitual responses were substantially transformed. The convert’s ethical progress, rather than a mere capacity to verbally explain previous teachings, would signal his or her readiness for deeper teachings.

³¹ Consider the content of those encyclical letters—Colossians and Ephesians, assuming Ephesians was written for multiple churches—written by Paul to churches he did not personally found. Again, he assumes the basic storyline is in place. After all, he’s writing to churches. They’ve already been gathered and baptized. He fills out some basic understandings of Christ’s work, then focuses on moral exhortation, elaborated by reflecting upon the distinctive significance of Christian baptism. Toward the end of each letter, church order—especially in terms of household conduct—receives consideration.

³² The necessity of moral development before receiving “solid food” was retained and developed by the early apologists, see Irenaeus of Lyon, *Adversus haereses* 4.38.1; Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum* 2.25; Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogus* 1.6.

“chewable” teachings are depth readings of the Old Testament in which God’s peculiar power and essence become known through figurative interpretations. Clement provides an example. “Christ our Passover was sacrificed for us” (citing 1 Cor. 5:7b) exemplifies mystic contemplation.³⁵

Clement’s clue opens some promising leads. In Pauline terms, if Clement is correct, “chewables” would be “mysteries”—things that God had in mind from ages past, left allusions to in the Scriptures, but only recently revealed to Jesus’ people (Rom 16:25–27). The section in 1 Cor 2:6–3:17 would support such a reading. Paul speaks “mysteries” to the mature. These mysteries are alluded to through a composite quotation from Isaiah in which God’s wisdom in the cross was revealed to Paul. A quick survey of Paul’s revelation of “mysteries” shows they are often offered as deep insights into Old Testament writings as they foreshadow realities in Christ and the church (for instance, Rom 11:25ff.; 16:25–27; 1 Cor 2:6ff.; 15:51ff.; Eph 5:31–32).

In the context of Hebrews, a similar identification would fit. The Hebrews writer wants to move beyond “milk” in his teaching and determines to do so if God allows (6:3). Much of his written homily consists precisely of typological readings of Scripture, which Paul would have called “mysteries.”

Given these convergences, I think it safe to consider insightful Christological readings of the Old Testament writings as constituting the “chewables” or “solid food.” These depth readings, at least the more elaborate ones, were reserved for substantially transformed converts and mostly passed on in person rather than in writing. For the fledgling follower of Jesus, catechetical “milk” provided instruction in the four areas expounded above, with the primary goal of personal transformation into Christlikeness.

Contemporary Usefulness

If the above reading is accurate, it answers a perennial question among evangelists and ministers. Where does one begin when instructing a seeker? What is appropriate at the earliest stages and what should be reserved for a later time? With or without biblical guidance, this practical question presses every minister. If there were no biblical guidance, we would have to manufacture an approach on our own. By God’s mercies, we do have the outlines

³⁵ *Stromata* 5.10.66.5.

of a clear biblical curriculum for the first instruction. Moreover, it bears all the marks of deep, practical wisdom in initiating seekers. As a longtime evangelist, it strikes me that I could not improve on this basic list of topics.

So, here are some schematic suggestions for a first round of instruction in the Christian faith. First, always begin with telling the stories of Jesus as they are found in the gospels. Allow the narratives to evoke questions, and strive to bring those questions back to Jesus' life, teachings, death and resurrection. In order to render this account of Jesus intelligible, provide a basic overview of God's interactions with humanity from creation to the New Creation. But make Jesus the central focus.

Second, make use of Jesus' teachings—especially the Sermon on the Mount. Moral instruction should occupy a central place. This is easily interwoven with the narrative presentation. As one provides an overview of the Old Testament, the stories should highlight positive and negative examples—trust in God leads to life, deeds set against him produce death. Much of Jesus' moral teaching is interwoven with specific encounters in which the moral instruction provided needed guidance or correction. We too should provide the narrative frame with our moral exhortation.

Third, church order isn't an afterthought. We convert people to Jesus. We must never lose this central focus. However, this involves incorporating them into a community of Jesus' students. As a matter of kindness, we should supply some basic coordinates for life in a new community along with the biblical-theological rationale for those practices. For those of us who are long familiar with church life, it's easy to forget how odd the church's regular practices and specific roles are to an outsider. Providing a basic orientation to how things work in the congregation alleviates disorientation and eases a convert's nerves.

Finally, take time to clarify the resurrection of the body and the day of the Lord. Hope motivates. Converts suffer much in the process of radical personal change. Only a clear set of expectations will focus the will and enable actual change. A basic account of Christian hope will provide all that is needful and helpful.

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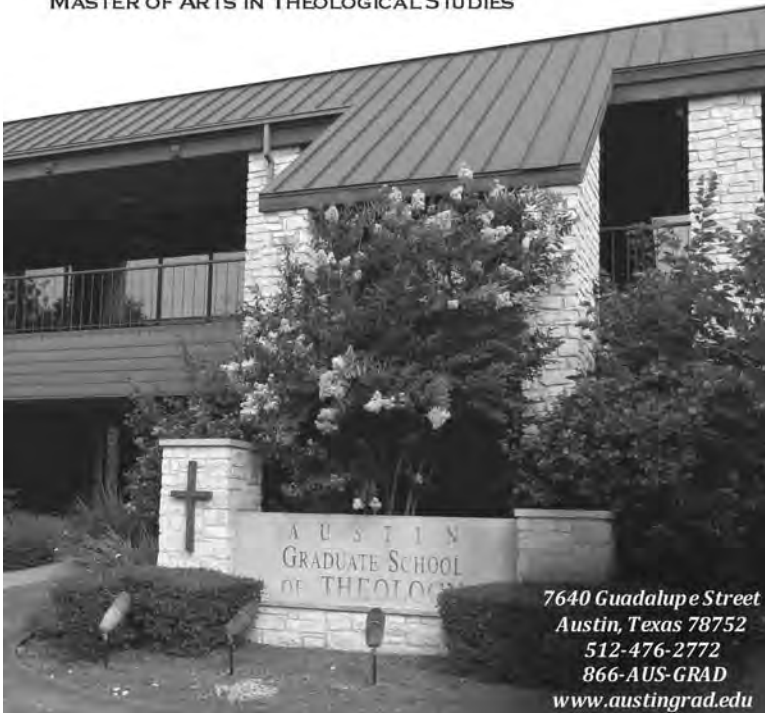


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Baptism and the Moral Life

Allan J. McNicol

Some years ago I encountered a student who left an indelible impression upon me. He came from a privileged background. But he had fallen into a dissolute lifestyle, and after paying the price physically he began to wonder about his own spiritual outcome. Facing this situation, he took my class on Paul and joined the campus student Christian Fellowship. After studying with several students, he made the decision to follow Christ, and he asked me to baptize him.

On the given day, in the presence of a handful of students, I baptized him at the University Avenue Church. I will always remember what happened next. After his immersion he and I began to ascend the steps of the baptistery. With a booming voice that reverberated off the walls of the nearly empty church building he spoke out, “Dr. McNicol, now that I am baptized what happens if I sin?”

Like most academic teachers of Bible in the fellowship of Churches of Christ I have written on the topic of baptism.¹ But it occurs to me that we have a habit of analyzing carefully every aspect associated with the actual event of baptism while omitting or only discussing generally one of its most important aspects: after beginning a new life in Christ, what is supposed to happen next? How is one to conduct his or her life in light of dying and rising with Christ?

¹ Allan J. McNicol, “Baptism Yesterday and Today,” *Christian Studies* 14 (1994): 33–44; “One Lord and one Body: Implications for the Common Faith of the Church,” *Christian Studies* 23 (2008–2009): 17–36; also my catechetical study, *Preparing for Baptism: Becoming Part of the Story of the People of God* (Austin: Christian Studies Press, 2001).

The New Testament letters say much about the manner of life a Christian is supposed to demonstrate, and most Christians agree that we are to grow in our moral life. But how does the new entrant into the kingdom envision this as taking place? After all, we have entered into a new order of creation (Gal 6:15; 2 Cor 5:17).

At the outset we need to remember that if we look around in the Bible God has not left us without resources in these matters. Even before the new order with Christ, God guided his people Israel through a covenant relationship which spells out with extensive precision how his people were to conduct their lives. But what about God's intentions for his people in the new order initiated by the death and resurrection of Christ? In this essay I will attempt to address how we need to understand the connections between our baptism and what is supposed to take place in the moral life that follows.

A good place to start is Gal 3:26–29. These verses bring to our attention an important theological claim for Paul. Baptized believers have entered into a community where, whether we be Jew or Greek, slave or free-person, or male or female, all are one in Christ. This claim is important for a contemporary believer in Western society. Whatever our society is, it can hardly be called “one.” The new believer finds herself in a world where, in the name of freedom, a multitude of diverse social behaviors are tolerated and encouraged. Even among those who claim obedience to Christ the church is anything but one in its approaches to race, class, and gender issues. In these areas we appear to manifest much more the wider divisions of society than the people of the new creation who have linked themselves to the new order of Christ. Have we missed Paul's point? Has he given us a prescription that is unrealizable? What is the connection between the new world we enter at baptism and our continuing pursuit of the moral life?

Argument and Procedure

Far too often we have failed to understand how subversive Paul's vision of the new life in Christ really is. Even in the early church there were those who had difficulty accepting his theological position. However, I claim that Paul's theological world possesses a logic that provides coherence for believers today to shape their outlook on what is involved in life in the new creation. Thus my argument supports the claim that, when properly grasped,

putes. Based on the reading of a configuration of prophetic texts in the Scriptures, Paul was convinced that the time had arrived when the door was opening for the Gentiles to enter in and receive the blessings of God's covenant with his people. Indeed, he was going across the eastern part of the Empire encouraging the Gentiles to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, even taking some of these converts on pilgrimage to the Holy City to acknowledge these new realities.²

A concrete example of the problems involved can be seen in a dispute Paul faced with Peter in Antioch, Syria.³ Apparently during the time Paul associated with the church at Antioch both Jewish and Gentile believers were loose in their observance of the laws of *Kashrut* set forth in the Torah. When they were together they ate non-kosher food. Even after Peter arrived on the scene, he did the same for a while, but then withdrew after some Jews from outside expressed reservations. Of course, Paul vigorously protested Peter's actions and branded them inconsistent. Paul apparently found little support and subsequently moved elsewhere.

Still nursing his wounds, he found himself in a similar situation with respect to his Gentile converts in Galatia. By now Paul knew that he had to take a principled stand. If his mission were to be accepted and gain traction in the church some basis must be found whereby Jew and Gentile could worship and fellowship by eating and praising God together in the context of one body. The unity of the new order was at stake. Consequently, he wrote Galatians.

But solving this problem was not going to be easy. Whoever the teachers opposing Paul in Galatia were, they were raising some substantial theological points.⁴ Essentially, they appeared to argue that to enjoy the benefits that

² Rainer Riesner, *Paul's Early Period: Chronology, Mission Strategy, Theology*, trans. Doug Stott (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 235–36. Paul used many texts, but Isa 66:18–24 and Zech 14:1–21 would have been central. On Acts see Justin Taylor, “Paul and the Jewish Leaders at Rome: Acts 28:17–31” in *Paul's Jewish Matrix*, ed. Thomas G. Casey and Justin Taylor (Makvah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2011), 311–26.

³ Record of this dispute is found in the letter Paul wrote shortly after the dispute happened (Gal 2:11–14).

⁴ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 33A (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 302–06. On the basis of a massive study of Galatians, Martyn provides a convenient and thoughtful synopsis of how

come in Christ, Gentile converts must accept the continuing validity of God's traditional covenant with Israel that the teachers generally considered to have a normative narrative. As with most Jews, the teachers in Galatia considered that this covenant narrative began with Abraham. Genesis 17:9–14 was crucial because it made the claim that God had inaugurated a special relationship with Abraham and his descendants forever. Thus it was possible to convince many believers that to receive these blessings culminating in Christ one must observe circumcision, the heavenly calendar of holy festivals, and the divine laws given through Moses.⁵

This did not sit well with Paul. For all intents and purposes such a position came close to demanding that one must become a Jew before receiving the benefits of God's promises fulfilled in Christ.⁶ Could Paul, in the interest of unity, accept this narrative?

We know his answer. In his letter to the Galatians he asserts, "Absolutely not!" He even brands this position as "another gospel" (Gal 1:6–12). Clearly this came close to the narrative of the people of God in the past; but now it was the wrong narrative. In his letter, he argues emphatically that the basis for entrance into the people of God now takes place in faith expressed in baptism (Gal 3:26–29). Baptism puts Jew and Gentile on equal terms before God. As Reuel Lemmons used to say, "The ground at the foot of the cross is equal." In a later key text in Paul's writings he states that it is the cross that is the basis of oneness before God (Rom 3:21–26). But as it has been pointed

Paul's opponents construed their arguments. He considers the teachers infiltrating the Galatian churches to be Jewish. This would be understandable. The reputation for Gentile moral looseness had a long history among the Jews. At the very least Paul's success in his Gentile mission would have raised eyebrows in Jerusalem among the Jewish church leaders. Knowing how church life operates, they would wonder how carefully Paul was maintaining the traditional moral heritage of the covenant.

⁵ Cf. Gal 4:10. Martyn, *Galatians*, 303, notes the special importance of certain days and feasts in Judaism. He refers the reader to important intertestamental writings such as Jubilees 16:12–18 and Sirach 44:19–20 when certain times were connected with key features of the covenant.

⁶ Normally in this era for a Gentile to become a part of the family of Israel one would have to accept proselyte baptism. There is no record in Galatians of the teachers making this demand. Perhaps "the putting on of Christ" in Christian baptism was considered to be an appropriate substitute.

out, even in this great text on cross and atonement Paul stresses that this is “for all who believe” and “there is no distinction.”⁷

This theological discrimen provides the basis for Paul’s alternative narrative on Abraham and his descendants (Gal 3:6–4:31). Even today it is shocking to note how different his reading of Scripture was from the standard narrative of Israel’s story in Paul’s day.

Paul is radical, but he does not break completely with his heritage. One foundational area where he agrees with the teachers is that, in order to receive the benefits of salvation in Christ, one must accept the validity of God’s covenant with Israel. But after that, his reading of Israel’s story begins to diverge in a quite different way. He argues for a different reading of the Abraham story. Yes, Abraham is the key figure marking the beginning of the covenant story. Paul accepts the conventional Jewish reading that Abraham was a convert who, after hearing God’s call, was led to a different place. As such it is easy to accept that Abraham becomes a model convert for Gentiles of Paul’s time. Now entrenched in the land where God brought him, a crucial covenant was made promising Abraham many descendants (seed) who would bless the nations (Gen 12:3; 13:14–17; 15:4–5; 22:17–18). In these texts the proper interpretation of his descendants is crucial. Paul argued that Abraham’s true seed are not those who do “the works of the Law” but those who manifest Abraham’s faith.⁸ Paul’s complicated argument centers around understanding the word “seed” as a collective. The true seed (descendant), the example of faith *par excellence*, was Christ. Whether Jew or Gentile, through baptism into him, all are heirs of the promised blessings and now in Christ through him, as Abraham’s descendants, constitute the Israel of God (Gal 6:16). The same heavenly Father who called Abraham to be the father of Israel, also as heavenly Father allowed Abraham’s seed to die for our sins

⁷ E. P. Sanders, “Paul’s Attitude Toward the Jewish People,” *Union Seminary Quarterly* 33/34 (1978): 179.

⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul’s Letter to the Galatians* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 68–77. Dunn helpfully draws attention to what Paul means by “works of the Law.” Paul understands these as keeping the traditional points of covenant obligation accepted by the people of Israel. This was a far different proposition for Israel than that which is wearily repeated in a popular kind of evangelical theology where the gospel is reckoned to be the answer to a vain search for salvation through our own flawed works of personal achievement.

state it, “How do I structure and live my life so that I do not fall under the power of sin?”

It must be admitted that there is something attractive in lining up a list of “dos and don’ts” with respect to living the Christian life. Indeed, that is why many go in that direction; and when one looks at texts like Lev 18:1–5 it is easy to see why some in Paul’s world took that route with respect to keeping traditional covenantal obligations. Nowhere in the Pauline corpus does Paul address systematically what a similar process would look like after the revolutionary changes in God’s covenantal relationship with his people inaugurated by Christ. Paul is talking about real transformation, and something like that cannot be set out by a simple set of diagrams.

An important metaphor that Paul uses in Galatians to describe these changes is “freedom” (Gal 5:1–13). What should Christians think about freedom as an appropriate model while struggling to raise children in a society where traditional social norms and sexual mores are under assault? Unfortunately, this is about the point where many in the church today stop with Paul. Either they understand him as being unclear about what he means by his advocacy of freedom, or, often in conjunction with a certain reading of Rom 7:7–25, they consider him to be describing the Christian life as a torturous struggle between base desires (flesh) and the higher life of the Spirit. Either model presents problems. Consequently, many seeking a more coherent model on which to base their lives walk away and seek direction elsewhere.

On the other hand, I am suggesting that it may be worthwhile to take a second look at Paul. He has provided a remarkably fresh reading of the biblical story. One who accepts Christ and is baptized into him has become part of a new creation (Gal 6:15). Much of what we find in Paul is concerned with unpacking this point. Paul argues that reducing questions of faith to lists of “dos and don’ts” or a literal reading of texts like Leviticus 18:5 forgets that this way of structuring faith has been transmuted by Christ. For the one who is transformed by the Spirit (Gal 3:1–5) the law of Christ is “to love your

neighbor as yourself” (Gal 5:14; 6:2). As the new Torah, it all flows from that.¹¹

However, before we give full attention to what Paul means by the process of moral transformation that takes place as we enter into the new creation, it is important that some attention be given to the way Paul now conceived of traditional Torah after the Christ event. I would be the first to admit that some of Paul’s teachings about the law (Torah) are somewhat opaque. But there is no reason to go to an extreme and claim that he wrote it off entirely as a source of direction for the believer.¹²

Frequently, in texts like 1 Cor 9:8–11, Paul would appeal to Torah as a basis for teaching on important issues in the church. As part of the historic covenant with God’s people, although modified by the Christ event, it is es-

¹¹ Of course, Paul is speaking in Gal 6:2 about one who has been transformed by coming into the new creation. E. P. Sanders, *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 97, 115, notes that in Jewish writings it was common to summarize a wide body of Torah by citing a particular commandment. He provides several examples, starting with a text like Lev 19:18 which, interestingly enough, is echoed in Gal 6:2. The net result is that Gal 6:2 needs to be read in light of the whole transformation of the believer that takes place through the Christ event. Unfortunately, many liberal commentators in the past several centuries have missed the point that Sanders is making and, reading Gal 6:2 literally, argued that this text by itself constitutes the essence of Christianity.

¹² It is precisely here that I believe a considerable number of biblical interpreters in the Stone-Campbell tradition have misconstrued Paul. I address this issue at some length in Allan J. McNicol, “The Israel of God,” *Christian Studies* 27 (2015): 9–16. Essentially my emphasis there is to argue that Paul, the believer in Jesus as Messiah, would have major difficulty in construing covenantal history in a progressive scheme where the Mosaic covenant no longer has much value after the emergence of another. Indeed, there are many covenants noted in Scripture in the course of Israel’s comprehensive covenantal history. Despite the obvious diversity, I believe Paul would want to say that “the covenants, the giving of the law ... the promises” (Rom 9:4) on which the people of God sustain their identity are more like a prolific well. Certainly, he would want to say that the true narrative of God’s people can only be understood in light of the coming of Christ; but he would also add that some items like circumcision and the keeping of special days have transmuted into a different role for Jewish believers. The edge of my contention is that Paul would never say, despite texts like Col 2:14, which is often misconstrued, that the previous covenants ought to be discarded. They simply have a different place. Rather, I believe, he would gravitate toward understanding them with such images as “a well of living water” or “a treasure house” that continues to sustain the essential narrative for the story of God’s people.

pecially valuable for providing moral teachings for Gentile believers who had little exposure to the people of God. Paul frequently uses language grounded in the law to stress the need for moral purity and holiness in the church. He quotes key sections of the second table of the law as normative in Rom 13:8–10. Given the tolerance for sexual promiscuity in the Greco-Roman world, Paul often gave instructions against such practices that were anchored in the law (1 Cor 6:9, 12–20; Rom 1:18–32). These texts functioned as God’s norm for the Christian believer.¹³

Nevertheless, in keeping with the scriptural promises, Paul believed that a new era had dawned. Although he does not present a thoroughgoing argument about the precise moral norms to be embraced, he does present a fairly clear outline of the moral norms of the new creation. Since the importance of baptism is highlighted in this essay, in closing we will note the central role it plays both in transformation from the old order to the coming of God’s new world and in how this image is central in the growth of moral consciousness.

Baptism as Transformation

Galatians 3:26–29 is a transitional summary of Paul’s major argument against the Galatian “teachers” in 3:6—4:31. By this stage in his letter Paul has set out the case that it is not by ethnic characteristics that one becomes an inheritor of God’s promises of being part of the new creation. The initial summary in Gal 3:28 underscores this point by adding two other common pairings (slave/free person and male/female).¹⁴ Here we come to understand that despite ethnic, cultural, or gender differences, we are all called to be one in the spiritual community of the new creation.

This point is revisited toward the end of the letter (Gal 6:15–16). We become God’s people through our entrance into his revitalized community on

¹³ There is considerable discussion among scholars about tensions between Matthew and Paul. But in these matters Matthew’s supplementation of Torah with the Sermon on the Mount is not far from Paul.

¹⁴ In Col 3:12 we revisit the listings of the pairs of Gal 3:28. There are some differences. Noticeably, “male and female” do not occur. Whether Colossians and Ephesians are part of a developing Pauline School is an issue for another discussion. But whatever position we take on the matter it appears clear that there is some connection with Galatians 3 (cf. Eph 4:24).

the grounds of the eschatological event of the new creation. It is not through circumcision or uncircumcision, both of which are irrelevant on this score. The reality of the new creation is such an important claim that Paul calls this a “rule” (Greek, *kanōn*) that defines the Israel of God.

What are the parameters of this world of the new creation? Above all, for Paul, its coming is the truest expression of absolute reality. In the death and resurrection of Christ a new constitutive order has broken into the world. Using traditional Jewish terminology of the two ages (the old era and the messianic age), Paul celebrated the arrival of the new order. Drawing on this terminology of the two ages, Paul believed that the people of the new age had begun to engage the previous dominant powers and were in the course of dethroning them from their previous status of power. Each new believer who enters the new order through faith and the operation of the Spirit, concretized in baptism into Christ, is further proof of the triumph of the kingdom over the old order. Until the end, believers live in an intervening time characterized by hope. This hope centers on the belief of Christ’s ultimate triumph over the evil powers and includes the coming redemption of the bodies of the people of God as a step to the full arrival of the new creation (Rom 8:18–39).

If this is not enough, for Paul there is even more. Baptism into Christ is not only a static event in time, but it also involves initiating a behavior characterized as dying and rising with Christ that persists in the Christian life. Until final redemption, the old world is still present and, as we well know, exercises considerable power and influence. So, dying with Christ is not only a past event but it is a constant feature of Christian existence.¹⁵ This is an aspect of Paul’s theology that needs far greater attention in our preaching. Paul is saying that sin is active in the world as long as the creation is not fully redeemed. The presence of these powers causes physical suffering and constantly seeks to draw us deeper into a base manner of life (Rom 8:5, 6, 13). It is fascinating how Paul notices the sneers of some detractors about his physical sickness and weakness. He answers by arguing that his suffering parallels the dying and rising of Christ. The fact that God continues to grant life through death within the community of the body of Christ not only parallels

¹⁵ Robert C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Berlin: Alfred Töpelmann, 1967), 127.

Jesus' life, it is, in itself, a sign of our final redemption for which we long as Christ's risen power is brought to perfection (2 Cor 13:8–10; cf. Rom 8:17ff.; 2 Cor 4:14ff).¹⁶

Perhaps we can sum up this process by simply noting that, for Paul, true Christian life presumes that the living Christ dwells in the believer, as Paul says in Galatians 2:20, "It is no longer I but Christ who lives in me." The Christian life is a constant process of mortification and vivification (Rom 8:16–17). By gaining the small victories over sin we are constantly dying to the old life and becoming more integrated into the Christ with whom we will share ultimate glory.¹⁷ This "dying to self" is how Paul suggests the Torah has been transmuted by the Christ event.

Just as each generation recalls one or several great events that seem to crystalize the era in which they lived, so every believer remembers his or her baptism. In Galatians 3:27, Paul tells his readers that they have "put on" or "clothed themselves" (*enedusasthe*) in Christ. For Paul, this "putting on" requires changing from something else. In Col 3:9–10 Paul reminds believers that they have "put off" the old person with his corresponding actions and "put on" a different lifestyle in keeping with the new order. Judith Gundry-Volf even claims that this transformation is not merely ethical but can be construed as "ontological."¹⁸ While this term raises some questions, it does suggest that a critical transition has taken place in our baptism. Already in Romans 13:14, Paul uses similar terminology to urge his readers "to put on the Lord Jesus Christ" and "stop making provision for matters of sinful desire." Here again, I believe the process of dying and rising with Christ is in the background as the model of Christian life. To be sure, Paul spills a considerable amount of ink in his letters in giving advice about how this must

¹⁶ Tannehill, *Dying and Rising*, 79, 129.

¹⁷ M. E. Thrall, "Paul's Understanding of Continuity Between the Present Life and the Life of the Resurrection," in *Resurrection in the New Testament*, ed. R. Bieringer, et al. (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), 298–300.

¹⁸ Judith Gundry-Volf, "Beyond Difference? Paul's Vision of a New Humanity in Galatians 3:28," in *Gospel and Gender: A Trinitarian Engagement with Being Male and Female in Christ*, ed. Douglas Atchison Campbell and Alan J. Torrance (New York: Continuum, 2003), 29–35. In fairness, Gundry-Volf's article is concerned to make the point that transformation comes in the conversion process, not in social, cultural, and other differences among believers that still remain the same.

take place among his converts. But he also is clear that our transition into Christ in our baptism is the initial transformative moment for the believer.

This can be illustrated by an incident that took place when I was teaching in the *Biblijski institut* in Zagreb, Croatia. One morning I came into class and found the students all around the seminar table unusually animated and excited. At first I thought I may have had an item of clothing out of place; but I soon discovered it was something else. Some years earlier a lady had accepted Christ and was baptized. Her husband was totally non-religious and at the time stated that he would never enter a church. The evening prior to this class meeting, however, he was baptized in the assembly room of the Zagreb Church of Christ one story below our classroom. His wife had been so transformed in her new Christian life that he decided to become a believer. As it was in the New Testament era, so it is today: Baptism ought to mark the transition from serving the powers of the old age to following another Lord.

Theologians tend to call this a sacramental understanding of baptism. I am happy with this label so long as it is understood that the actual transition to God's new world takes place through the action of the Spirit—not through the water itself or on account of the credentials of the one conducting the baptism. As a teacher who writes within the context of the Stone-Campbell heritage I have always believed our emphasis on the centrality of baptism is one of the high points of our witness. In this essay I have wondered whether, in light of Paul, we ought to push it farther. Baptism is a life-changing moment, but it is just as important to understand that it is only the beginning of a lifetime process of dying and rising with Christ.

Conclusion

Many years have passed since I baptized my student at University Avenue Church. He moved to another city and I subsequently lost touch with him. Occasionally I find myself saying a brief prayer on his behalf. I trust that he came to see that through his transition into a new dominion he was only beginning a lifetime characterized by dying and rising with Christ. In this way, the tendency to return to the old order is defeated, regardless of missteps we have along the way.

In this essay, I have drawn attention to Gal 3:26–29, focusing on the centrality of Paul's reference to baptism. These verses are part of a larger argu-

ment in which the apostle claims that God's promises to Abraham are not received through adherence to the regulations of Torah but through faith in Christ. Through "putting on" Christ in baptism we have become part of the new creation and have received a divine promise to share in its ultimate fulfillment. Our hope finally abides in our existence in Christ (Gal 2:20).

If this short essay accomplishes nothing else, it will be a cautionary word that parents and teachers have an awesome responsibility for preparing the ones under their care, not only for the time of entrance into the new creation, but also for spiritual growth in the new order.

Turning Point: Baptism as Rite of Passage

M. Todd Hall

Churches of Christ are known for many things in the broader Christian context of North America, but perhaps most prominent is our historical insistence on the important—even sacramental—role that baptism plays in the life of the believer. It is rightly seen as a turning point, as the place where a penitent sinner is met by a gracious God. This recognition of baptism as the moment of transition, along with a general insistence on withholding communion from the unbaptized, has allowed Churches of Christ to maintain something of a rite of passage in our life of faith. Ironically, though, our sacramental understanding of baptism can lead to aborted transformation insofar as it often leads to a “rush to the water.”¹ For this rite is meant to provide vital service to Christians—new and old—in that it serves as an historical, incarnate moment of transference of the believer from a previous life (of sin and separation) to a new one (of forgiveness and communion with God), and from the status of outsider to insider.² In this way, it performs both a sociological and pedagogical function. That is, baptism serves as a touchstone moment for believers in Churches of Christ, as an event that both embodies the faith and serves as a definitive moment in time on which believers may reflect as they live their lives of faith.

¹ Cf. Daniel Austin Napier, “A Sound Beginning: Retrieving an Ancient Model of Christian Conversion,” *Christian Studies* 26 (2013–2014): 47–63.

² Cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 279f.

Insofar as this is the case, it is vitally important for Churches of Christ not only to maintain the tradition of believers' baptism, but to further develop its practice in order to more effectively accomplish these purposes. In this essay I will expand on the sociological and pedagogical significance of baptism and argue for a more structured process in the way churches go about baptizing believers. In many cases, this will mean significant instruction in the tenets of the faith and training in the practice of the faith prior to baptism, which may (and perhaps should) lead to delay in performing the actual baptism of the believer. This delay will prove difficult given our understanding of the salvific role baptism plays in the life of the church. Thus I argue for the consideration of a third category in the conversion of a person, a state not unlike the concept of "liminality," made popular by Victor Turner, in which a convert is *between* the old and the new.³ In this category, seekers find themselves to be co-worshippers with the community, but not yet fully included, much like the catechumens of the ancient church (and perhaps the God-fearers of the synagogue). This liminal space provides an occasion for the church to engage in activities and relationships that are formative of Christian character and social behaviors in such a way that remain with the baptizand throughout the remainder of his life. In this way, we may take baptism even more seriously than we presently do.

The Sociological and Pedagogical Functions of Baptism

Baptism as Sociological Event. Social scientists have studied rituals and their significance to social development and cohesion for over a century. Much of this research has proven both insightful and helpful to church leaders interested in developing practices in which churches may engage in order to assist faithfulness and community among its members, despite some philosophical and methodological assumptions which are problematic. I want to suggest, here, that we read the findings of sociology through an incarnational lens. The condescension of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into history and

³ See, for example, Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: De Gruyter, 1995), 94–130. The term liminality was originally used by Arnold van Gennep in his landmark sociological study, *Manuel du folklore français contemporain*, 7 vols. (Paris: Picard, 1858). Turner's work on rites of initiation and transformation built on van Gennep's foundation and greatly influenced academic thought, to this day.

created order, fully realized in Jesus Christ, allows us to see human activities and customs as means of communication from this God. What I mean is, God presumably spoke to Abraham in his native tongue (cf. Gen 12), just as he made covenant following patterns that would have been familiar to people in the Ancient Near East.⁴

A proper reading of social sciences for Christians, then, moves from theology to social theory rather than the other way around.⁵ That is to say, theology, and particularly the Bible, provides the framework for interpreting and appropriating modalities of thought from outside the church, such as philosophy and sociology. A chastened engagement with social science which recognizes and takes seriously its limitations provides rich fields for thought regarding the way the church may engage in community and personal development. It may also provide helpful guidance in considering how the church may most effectively engage in her teaching and rituals.

One of the developments within social science theory which may be fruitfully employed (if properly chastened) is the exploration of the function of

⁴ For an example of the God of Israel adopting covenant practices prevalent in the ANE, see Gen 15:12–21, especially v. 17, in which the Lord (in the form of a smoking fire brand) passes between the pieces of the sacrificial offering, thus making himself responsible for the keeping of the covenant. Cf. Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) for a more detailed exploration of the presence of covenant material from the ANE in the Old Testament.

⁵ Cf. Peter J. Leithart, “Modernity and the ‘Merely Social’: Toward a Theological Account of Baptismal Regeneration,” *Pro Ecclesia* 9 no. 3 (2000): 319–330. Leithart offers an insightful critique of the wholesale adoption of the social sciences in theology (in this article focusing chiefly on the results of ritual theory). While Leithart sees some benefits of applying social science theory to the study of Christian rituals, he warns of the “questionable methodological and substantive cargo that may be smuggled in under cover of ‘science’” (p. 320). I am also aware of the magisterial critique of social sciences offered by John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006). Having heard these cautions, and I believe in keeping with Milbank and Leithart, I suggest that it is a fallacy that one must either accept or reject the methodologies and findings of social sciences wholesale. One of the fundamental strengths of Christianity since its founding is its ability to appropriate useful elements, terminology, and concepts from surrounding cultural thought without accepting all its premises and its methodological freight. One may thus, for instance, accept many findings of social theory without assenting to Darwinian theories of social development which run rife in social science departments in universities.

rites as formative events in the life of both communities and individuals. The field as developed has become known as ritual studies.⁶ Contra the dualistic understanding of the Cartesian “I” that so permeates contemporary, late-modern (and postmodern) philosophy and the social sciences, humans have proven again and again to be social creatures whose identities are formed within and through social roles and interactions.⁷ Thus rites of passage, serving as demarcations of social groupings, are vitally important actions that solidify one’s place in the community. They are powerful social moments that instantiate transformation and transition from outsider to insider rather than merely serving as symbols of a transition which has already occurred.⁸

In addition to solidifying community bonds, rites of passage also reinforce the community’s ethos in the newly initiated.⁹ As outsider moves to insider, participating in rites which he has previously only observed, he becomes fully responsible to the community for maintaining the community’s ethical and communal norms. This moment of transformation can be quite extreme, and is almost invariably accompanied by stable rituals surrounded by promises of fidelity (to the community and/or individuals). The need for and importance of this formality and ritual are especially true in sacred contexts, as the candidate moves from profane to holy. In these contexts, such as Christian ordination, baptism, and marriage, the transition is so radical that an intermediate stage is often required.¹⁰

⁶ In the field of ritual studies, see especially Ronald Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1990).

⁷ Christians, of course, should recognize this somewhat banal fact from the teachings of the Bible itself: from the beginning, humans have been social and socially formed creatures. For a purely sociological account of rituals and community, see, for example, Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Rev. Ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

⁸ On baptism as instantiation of transformation and social transition, cf. Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2003), 102, 150–57.

⁹ Cf. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

¹⁰ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage: A Classical Study of Cultural Celebrations*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), 1–2. The need for a stable, ritualized moment of transformation is illustrated in a plethora of social transitions, whether in weddings or graduations or enlistment in the armed forces.

Baptism, then, has historically functioned as a rite of passage for the church. From the second century on, the church developed elaborate routines and rituals to facilitate this transition, all of which served to add gravity to the moment of baptism.¹¹ Since baptism served, in the ancient church, as transition from outsider to insider—as the line of demarcation between those within the church and those without—its solemnity served as a signpost to both the baptizand and the community of believers that the convert was now fully included in the life of the church. Thus baptism has served both theological and sociological roles for the church.

It is important to note here that, as with other rites of passage, baptism is not merely the end of the process of conversion. While baptism remains the moment of conversion in which sins are “washed away” (Acts 22:16), it also serves as a concrete moment in time which manifests the transformation of conversion. As a wedding, with its vows and formal ritual, is meant to bind spouses together in fidelity throughout their lives, so the baptismal experience—theologically *and* sociologically—is meant to be a touchstone. That is, baptism is a moment in time that reverberates (and may be recalled) throughout the rest of the convert’s life as he proceeds toward realized transformation into the ethos of the community—in the case of Christian conversion, toward sanctification.¹²

In these ways, then, baptism may be uniquely suited to the task of forming disciples of Jesus into a transformed community, and this is something that the American church desperately needs. The contemporary West is largely a world of disconnected, lonely individuals, who are not held together by a common history or tradition, and only loosely connected to one another by rituals of any kind (if at all).¹³ Thus, it is important for churches today, in

¹¹ Cf. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 855–56. See also Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism: From the New Testament to the Council of Trent*, Liturgy, Worship and Society (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006). For a detailed picture of the process of conversion in the early church, see Napier, “A Sound Beginning,” 51–61.

¹² For a very helpful exposition of the meaning of baptism for living faithfully as Christ’s students, see William H. Willimon, *Remember Who You Are: Baptism, a Model for Christian Life* (Nashville: The Upper Room, 1980), 105ff., especially 108–09.

¹³ Here I note James K.A. Smith’s phenomenological account of the “liturgy of the mall” in his excellent book, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural For-*

the ritual- and tradition-starved world of late modernity, to recognize the vital sociological role that the rite of baptism serves in the lives of their members. Baptism, as a community oriented ritual, provides a framework for resisting both the radical individualism and the de-sacralized world of our contemporary culture—a culture which Zygmunt Bauman has labeled “liquid modernity” for its lack of solidity and constant, disorienting change.¹⁴ Christians who experience Christian baptism as a solemn, sacred ritual have, as it were, an anchor driven into something solid which may then provide the strength and steadfastness to enact *lasting* transformation both individually and communally.¹⁵ If the church is to revitalize her mission to contemporary American society, she must reinvest her ritual practices with the “pomp and circumstance” historically central to sacred rites. This will provide stability in the shifting climate of “liquid modernity.”

The pedagogical function of baptism. In addition to its sociological function, baptism serves a pedagogical function as well. The typical mode of pedagogy in modernity is what Paulo Freire referred to as the “banking model,” that is, a system in which one who currently has knowledge transfers that knowledge into the students before him, divorced from practice and the students’ own knowledge and experience.¹⁶ In this epistemological environment, the mind has been considered disconnected from the body, that is, from human experience. Thus, education has focused on theoretical knowledge, and teaching has been reduced to lecturing or other classroom activities (seminars and the

mation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 19–22. One could argue, I think successfully, that the liturgies currently holding the West together are those of the consumerist model of “late capitalism.” Insofar as these “rituals” are meant to form persons into individual consumers, one must recognize that they are not particularly suited to creating strong enough bonds to hold together a united populace, or to make lonely, disconnected persons feel welcomed into and a part of a broader community. These rituals, then, are antithetical to the Christian rites, which are meant to form believers into the *community* of God.

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012). Bauman has an enlightening discussion of the corrosive effects of consumerism on shared culture on pages 72ff.

¹⁵ Cf. M. Todd Hall, “*Oro, Ergo Sum: The Pedagogy of Spiritual Formation Among Protestant Seminarians in the United States—Toward a Post-Cartesian Framework*” (PhD diss., Texas State University, 2016), 109ff.

¹⁶ Cf. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1970), chapter 2 especially.

like). What is often denied in this environment is any sense of embodied knowing, in which acts that occur in the body shape human knowledge and practice. This is problematic, however, insofar as embodied pedagogies—ways of instruction which involve both mind and body—educate and create knowledge in ways which theoretical education simply cannot.¹⁷ Humans are bodies, interacting with the world and experiencing it through these bodies, and thus acts/actions have a pedagogical significance far beyond that which modernity has assigned to them. As Robert Banks has suggested, “Truth must be embodied as well as articulated, incarnated as well as revealed.”¹⁸

Baptism is one such act which takes place in the body and implicitly educates the baptizand. Let us reflect, for a moment, on the way that the practice of immersion informs the believer both theologically and practically. First, baptism is an act of surrender. As the Lord’s Prayer begins with a confession of God’s sovereignty and providential care, so baptism is submission in trust to God’s extension of grace to the baptizand.¹⁹ As the believer is plunged beneath the inhospitable environment of water, she practices her confession, trusting that she will be drawn forth into new life. If she has been properly prepared for this embodied experience of surrender, she learns not only the theoretical concept of “offering herself to God,” she *practices* it. Baptism (and the Supper) are thus powerful moments, *thick* practices in the life of the believer which remain with her throughout her life.²⁰

Likewise, baptism is a rite of passage into a community, and not merely individual conversion. Though on occasion one learns of individuals baptized apart from the church, this should be greatly discouraged, for baptism is an act that instantiates the truth that the believer is now a part of God’s people. The people of God gather around the baptizand and engage in communion

¹⁷ Cf. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 40.

¹⁸ Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 172. Banks is discussing changes which are necessary for theological education, but his point of the importance of embodied education is applicable to church practice as well.

¹⁹ Incidentally, in this way, baptism is no more “works righteousness” than is faith/trust and confession. It is surrender, in trust, to God’s grace.

²⁰ I note again Smith’s discussion of “thick” liturgical practices in *Desiring the Kingdom*. Though baptism is a one-time event (and thus not the repetitive “thick practices” Smith discusses), it can (and should) be a formative event and perhaps the thickest practice of all.

elements were concealed under what scholars refer to as the ‘discipline of secrecy’ in the ancient church.²³

Indeed, in Churches of Christ the withholding of communion from the non-baptized performs much the same function: note that many congregations perform baptisms prior to the Lord’s Supper, so that the newly baptized may partake of the meal as a full member of the community.

Ancient Jewish practice provides analogs for this period of liminality as well, perhaps most clearly seen in betrothal, that is, the state between being single and being married. In this state, the couple was subject to the disciplines of marriage as if they were in fact married. Note that a husband- or wife-to-be would be guilty of adultery rather than fornication were they to engage in sexual relations with one who was not his or her betrothed.²⁴ If, in fact, the couple decided not to marry, a divorce was required (cf. Matt 1:18–19). Nevertheless, the betrothed were neither fully married nor fully single. They were not to engage in sexual intercourse and they did not participate fully in the other aspects of marital union. It was a period of preparation: not merely learning to be husband and wife, but practicing the discipline of betrothal prior to becoming fully included among the married of Jewish society.

An additional analog to this liminal state might be seen in the God-fearers of the New Testament. These were Gentile believers in the God of Israel who had not undergone the central rite of Judaism (circumcision) and who did not keep the dietary restrictions of the Jews. Nevertheless, the New Testament understands these to be at least co-travelers with the Jews of the synagogue, and there is evidence that they were a third category for the Jews as well.²⁵

²³ Napier, “A Sound beginning,” 55.

²⁴ Cf. Deut 22:13–21. The text specifically refers to means of determining virginity for a woman betrothed. It also provides punishment for those found guilty of losing virginity prior to marriage: execution. Given that capital punishment is not the penalty for premarital sex (Deut 22:29, Exod 22:15–16), Rabbinic interpreters of this text limited it to post-betrothal adultery. See Joshua Kulp, “‘Go Enjoy Your Acquisition’: Virginity Claims in Rabbinic Literature Reexamined,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 77 (2006): 36–37.

²⁵ See, especially, Luke 7:1–10, and the Jews pleading for the Centurion’s servant: “He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built our synagogue” (v. 4). See also Acts 13:16, 26. I am aware that the traditional understanding of the place of God-fearers among the Jews of the first century

baptism should be ritualized—by that I mean should follow a formal liturgy through which all the members of Christ’s body pass. Those who would be baptized should pass through a period of liminality in which they are called to practice various disciplines under a mentor in their congregation—for example, daily Scripture reading and prayer, certainly sexual purity, and moments of fasting—*toward* baptism, so that baptism and especially the first Lord’s Supper following it are the great crescendo at the end of the process of conversion, and the great opening motif of the life of conversion to follow.

Adjusting baptismal practices in this way will have several implications for the regular workings of churches. Worship planners should be more intentional in developing services toward the end of encouraging transformation in the baptized. Congregations should have several services each year that reflect on baptism and its centrality to the Christian walk (not merely salvation). Perhaps baptisms could be scheduled for these services, so that they become crescendos in the annual life of the congregation.

In addition, churches will need to be more thoughtful in how they engage in the education of their members, and perhaps especially of the children of the church. A congregation that wishes to encourage the transformational power of baptism as rite of passage must consider ways that their education programs might lead toward preparation for the moment of decision and ultimately passing through baptism. I do not think it an overstatement to suggest that, while the church’s children have been sojourning with the church for many years, it is clear that in many churches their education in both knowledge and practice of the faith is lacking. Often, in fact, education in churches is disconnected from any particular *telos*. Understanding baptism as rite of passage lends focus and thus organization and even urgency to the education program of the church: we are leading our children toward this moment, and our education programs should be built accordingly. This recognition could in fact be an impetus for renewal in our congregations’ vision of education altogether.

Conclusion

Baptism is the church’s central rite of passage. If we are to allow it to function, incarnationally, as God’s investing human activity with his divine grace, we need to reflect more deeply on the roles that rites of passage play in

community and engage in practices that enhance its ability to perform that role. Admittedly this has great implications for the ways we practice baptism, and these are extremely challenging to our traditional insistence on baptism at the moment of belief. It also has implications for other Christian practices, such as the Lord's Supper and the education programs of the church (perhaps especially those for youth). But those who would be a part of the people of God should sojourn with them for a time, and their baptisms should be truly formative, touchstone moments for the rest of their lives. Anything less than this does not do justice to the role that baptism is meant to be for Christians.

Concerning Rebaptism

Keith D. Stanglin

You have probably seen it before, if you have attended enough congregations of Churches of Christ in various places over a number of years. The invitation to respond to the gospel is offered, and someone comes forward for baptism. This person, though, is not a new convert to the faith or even an unimmersed believer. Rather, it is a person who has already been immersed as a believer but is now requesting “rebaptism.”

Occasions such as this are often accompanied by a measure of confusion about the status of the one seeking rebaptism and the significance or efficacy of the original baptism. Such questions, which ought to give more than a moment’s pause, are too often ignored, trumped instead by the impulse in Churches of Christ to baptize any responsible person who requests it. Indeed, the issue of rebaptism is a more pressing question within Churches of Christ, who hold a high view of baptism “for remission of sins,” than for evangelicals who tend to regard baptism as a mere symbol of an already accomplished justification. That is, for evangelicals who regard baptism as non-essential to the conversion process and not “for remission of sins,” since baptism never was part of the solution for sin, then baptism cannot be part of the solution for new, grievous sin.

One particularly confused instance that I have witnessed was the rebaptism of a nineteen-year-old young man. Even though the Lord’s Supper was celebrated by all baptized believers early in the worship service, at the close of the service the congregation typically would, in the presence of all, offer first communion to individuals who were baptized after the sermon. In this case, however, the newly rebaptized youth declined communion because he

had taken it with the other baptized believers earlier in the service. His earlier decision to participate in communion presumably reflected a sense of the authenticity of his original baptism. If that sense of salvation changed during the course of the sermon, which is possible, and he felt the sudden need for a genuine baptism, then presumably he would have also desired a genuine participation in the Lord's Supper. The fact that he partook before the rebaptism and declined the opportunity after it—along with the fact that the church leadership made no visible effort to address any of these problems—is a testimony to the confusion that exists in many churches about rebaptism. In other words, an attempt was never made publicly (or perhaps, for that matter, privately) to understand or confirm the central claim that is necessary for rebaptism, namely, that the original baptism was actually invalid.

If confusion is evident in this and similar cases, then it is a simple lack of instruction and reflection that enables the practice of rebaptism to persist in some congregations. I recall hearing a minister who, after rebaptizing a college student, admitted that no one ever taught him what to do when someone requests rebaptism. To his mind, apparently, the default action is to rebaptize now and ask questions later. If lack of instruction and reflection is part of the problem, then this brief article is offered as an initial corrective to the aberrant practice of rebaptism. To be clear, this article does not address the important question of the immersion of believers who were once baptized as infants apart from personal faith.¹ Rather, the concern here is with one who was immersed as a believer and, due to personal doubts about the original immersion, later desires re-immersion. It is necessary, then, to explore why someone would desire rebaptism, to respond to those reasons and consider the prerequisites for proper baptism, and finally to offer suggestions for the more thoughtful practice of the baptism of young believers.

¹ This question was at the heart of the sixteenth-century Anabaptist (i.e., “rebaptizer”) controversy, and it is a topic that still has many biblical, historical, theological, and ecumenical implications. It is also beyond the scope of this article. On ecumenical considerations from a credo-baptist perspective, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (1962; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 387-95.

Why Rebaptism?

Before venturing far into this question, it is important to affirm that those who seek rebaptism are doing so because they are serious about their faith and their relationship with God, and the reasons for seeking rebaptism may be as complex and unique as the individuals themselves. This discussion is therefore not an attempt in exhaustive psychoanalysis, but a reflection on admittedly anecdotal observations. The various reasons offered for seeking rebaptism indicate an intellectual or a moral dimension or a combination of the two. First of all, with regard to the moral dimension, a person desiring rebaptism may cite moral failings or shortcomings. Perhaps a grievous sin has been committed after baptism that leads one to doubt the authenticity of one's own original faith commitment. Perhaps the doubter feels that the remedy for lesser sins—repentance and prayer—is insufficient for the graver sin.

Second, one may appeal to intellectual failings or shortcomings of some sort that accompanied the original baptism. In Churches of Christ, this intellectual failing has most often been related to a failure to understand the purpose of baptism “for remission of sins” (Acts 2:38). The high, sacramental view of baptism summarized in that purpose statement has historically separated Churches of Christ from most American Protestants. Unless that purpose is understood, it is argued, then the baptism was not “for the right reason.” The logic is that, since baptism is the objective moment of salvation, it is essential that believing candidates for baptism understand it as such, and especially that they not deny its efficacy even as they receive the ordinance. For instance, those who are baptized simply to obey Christ and follow his example probably assume that they have already been saved prior to baptism, a perspective that is common in evangelical churches. From this point of view, if they did not understand this salvific purpose of baptism, then the baptism was invalid and, upon coming to a more perfect understanding, they should be rebaptized, which in effect constitutes the first valid baptism.

Another reason is commonly offered for rebaptism that is difficult to categorize as either exclusively intellectual or exclusively moral. It is often summed up as something like, “I didn’t understand what I was doing,” or “I didn’t know what I was getting into.” Expressed in this way, this reason is set in the context of an intellectual shortcoming that is blamed on a premature baptism. The failure of understanding, however, usually does not concern the

purpose of baptism. If the person in question grew up in and was immersed in a Church of Christ, then he almost certainly knew that baptism washes away sins (Acts 22:16). Instead, the shortcoming relates to a sort of experiential knowledge of the commitment that is necessary for true discipleship. That is, the person now feels that, at the point of his original baptism, he did not take the call to be a Christian seriously enough. This perception could come with the realization that there were other contributing factors and motivations for baptism—family or peer pressure (everyone at camp or in Bible class is doing it), fear of hell, and the like. This perception, moreover, typically surfaces in one’s late teens or twenties, when faith is maturing into one’s own, and could be prompted after a renewed consciousness of sin or a period of repeated sins that seem to reflect a lifestyle that succumbs to sin. In this case, there is an unmistakable moral dimension to the desire for rebaptism.

The assumption that a premature original baptism is a significant factor for those seeking rebaptism has been reflected not only in a wealth of anecdotal evidence, but also in the research conducted by Flavil Yeakley. In his study of 200 random subjects, whose original baptism ranged from age eight to age fifteen, “the younger the subject was at the time of his original baptism, the more likely he was to be re-baptized.”² Although the research is now quite dated, I can think of no relevant changes in church culture that would significantly modify the percentages.

Why Not Rebaptism?

Let us respond to each of the above reasons. As for the question of post-baptismal sin, the impulse to recognize such a category as grievous sin is not necessarily the problem. Although all sin separates the sinner from God, nevertheless some sins are, because of their motives or their nature or their consequences, more harmful than others (cf. Num 15:22–31; Mark 3:28–29; 1 Cor 6:18; 1 John 5:16–17). The mistake is not that a person grieves over a serious sin committed; it is in supposing that baptism must be repeated in order to receive forgiveness for any sin.

² Flavil R. Yeakley, Jr., *Why Churches Grow* (Broken Arrow: Christian Communications, 1979), 26–29, here 28. Those who were baptized at a younger age were also more likely to leave the church. My thanks to Darren Williamson for pointing me to Yeakley’s study.

The controversy was renewed toward the end of the nineteenth century. Both David Lipscomb's *Gospel Advocate*, influential throughout Tennessee and Texas, and Austin McGary's *Firm Foundation* (out of Austin), influential in Texas, were in agreement against missionary societies and instrumental music in worship. But in the 1890s and 1900s, these two papers debated the "re-baptism" of converts from denominations, making this the most contested matter regarding baptism among Churches of Christ. Like John Thomas in the 1830s, Austin McGary claimed that a person had to be (re)baptized if he was not baptized specifically for forgiveness of sins. One must understand that baptism is the final act that puts one into relationship with Christ. J. D. Tant went so far to add that the administrator of baptism had to be a "loyal" member of the "church of Christ" for the baptism to be valid.⁸ In contrast, Lipscomb, James A. Harding, and others associated with the *Gospel Advocate* argued that there may be many things that a person does not know or understand about baptism at the time; such ignorance does not invalidate it.⁹

The Tennessee tradition of Lipscomb and Harding, consistent with the earlier opinion of Alexander Campbell and nearly all restorationists before the 1890s, is surely correct in this matter. One's baptism does not mark the end of learning about the faith, including learning about baptism; it is, in many ways, the beginning of eternal progress in such knowledge. What God accomplishes and what is signified in baptism cannot be exhaustively known in this life, much less by a new convert. For example, if a convert did not understand, at the time of her baptism, the connection between baptism and Christ's death, burial, and resurrection (Rom 6:3-4), should she be baptized again once she comes to understand this important truth? After all, this teaching of the apostle Paul expresses the efficacy of baptism no less than its being "for remission of sins." The Roman Christians apparently did not all quite grasp this truth, or the apostle would not have had to teach it. Yet,

versies, see also Terry Cowan, "Thomas, John," in *Encyclopedia*, 741-42; and Douglas A. Foster, Paul M. Blowers, and D. Newell Williams, "Baptism," in *Encyclopedia*, 61-62.

⁸ Don Haymes, "Tant, Jefferson Davis," in *Encyclopedia*, 726. The position articulated by McGary and especially Tant is reminiscent of the ancient Donatist schism.

⁹ For a summary of this controversy, see Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 178-79.

plunging headlong into rebaptism. As noted above, the doubters' anxiety is usually related to what they have come to regard as a premature baptism; they were too young to make this important decision and receive baptism.

If the concern is about the lack of an experiential and existential awareness of the true cost of discipleship, or about the difficulty of resisting temptation and progressing in holiness, then very few believers indeed would be prepared to receive baptism. Again, baptism is the beginning of the journey, so it is natural that one may not anticipate every obstacle or fully grasp the journey's cost at the beginning, before the road has been fully traveled. Perhaps it is analogous to a young couple entering marriage. A twenty-one-year old bride—even one who has been very observant of her parents and their friends—cannot easily anticipate all the sorrows and joys of marriage that she will experience for herself. In some real ways, she “didn't know what she was getting into,” and she will learn through experience more fully what it means to be a wife, but her marriage is not for this reason invalid.

Perhaps the concern is about tainted motives, especially regarding the timing of baptism. Congregational or family culture may have influenced a young believer to be baptized at a particular time. Years later, a person may feel that he was baptized because his friends in Sunday school or at summer Bible camp were doing it. In such a case, the doubter should ask whether he, at the time, had faith in Christ. If he had no faith whatsoever, his profession of faith was a deceit, and he was only requesting baptism, say, to impress a girl, then perhaps the baptism was invalid, and he could now legitimately request baptism upon a genuine profession of faith. In most cases, however, doubters who request rebaptism were not attempting a ruse with their original baptism. They had real faith in Christ, but they were simply influenced by others to be baptized at a particular time. Nothing is wrong with being influenced positively by family and friends. A similar situation was likely at work with the so-called “household baptisms” (Acts 10:47–48; 16:15, 31–34). Those who were baptized were of an age sufficient for hearing God's word and believing (Acts 10:44, 46; 16:32, 34). Yet in each case there seems to be a first or principal believer (Cornelius, Lydia, jailer), alongside the others in their respective houses who are influenced by their good examples of faith. In sum, it is one thing to lie one's way through a baptism; it is another thing al-

together to have genuine faith but also to be influenced by one's family and friends toward commitment to Christ.

Another motivation that has been known to cause doubt about the validity of baptism is the fear of condemnation for sin. More mature believers who come to know a deeper love for God may look back with embarrassment on the fear of hell that they remember as the chief or exclusive motivation for original baptism. According to Jesus, however, fear of sin's dreadful penalty is a legitimate motivation for responding positively to God: "Fear the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell" (Matt 10:28). This verse is not suggesting that fear of hell is the highest motivation for discipleship. At the same time, such fear is clearly a legitimate factor, especially for someone who has not previously considered the danger. As in a child's relationship of obedience to a parent, fear of punishment is not a healthy goal for the relationship, but it can be a legitimate factor on the way to a healthy, loving relationship.

These and perhaps other motivations may not be the expressions of an already perfected faith, but they are consistent with the penitent faith that is a prerequisite for baptism. If moral and intellectual perfection become the prerequisite for baptism, then where would rebaptism stop? Any post-baptismal sin would need cleansing, not just the "serious" ones. Any new understanding about baptism or the gospel would require new commitment in baptism to a gospel that is now fully understood. Any new realization about the demands of discipleship and sense of purer motives would be incomplete without sealing it in another baptism. Until such perfection is reached, the baptisms have no end in sight, and the doubter will never have assurance of a salvation that depends on moral or intellectual perfection.

The fact is that baptism, received in penitent faith, embodies the promise of God's presence and salvation, incorporating one into the body of Christ for, among other things, the purpose of increasing toward perfection within that body (cf. Eph 4:11–16). It is the initiation rite, not a recurring sacrament that marks the goal of perfection, but the signpost at the beginning of a life-long journey toward an eternal goal of full sanctification and knowing "face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). Like the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ to

which baptism unites the believer, baptism is also a once-for-all, unrepeatable event.¹¹

Practical Suggestions

It is important to note that no judgment is intended against those who have been rebaptized. As mentioned above, it is not an uncommon practice, but it is rarely discussed or discouraged. It is thus not surprising that there would be not a few who have received rebaptism, and even more who have desired it for some of the reasons given here. The goal here is to encourage a more thoughtful theology and practice of baptism. Perhaps one who was rebaptized will come to a better understanding and reconsider the efficacy of the original baptism.

To the degree that rebaptism continues to be desired and practiced in some quarters, some practical suggestions may be worth considering. First, if someone comes to request “rebaptism,” it affords an immediate teaching opportunity. In general, the minister should attempt to talk the doubter out of the idea. If someone admits and knows that he was baptized only because everyone else was doing it, that he did not believe in Jesus at all, and that it was a total sham, then this one is a candidate for baptism (not “rebaptism”), because the first immersion was no baptism at all. But a person requesting “rebaptism” should be as thoroughly examined as a person requesting baptism. Did they have faith when they were baptized? Did they believe in Jesus, and do it out of obedience to him? If so, then they were truly baptized, and their baptism is the seal and assurance of God’s promise of redemption in them.

In the end, it is between that person and God. If doubters still insist that their first baptism was a façade, then they need to be informed in no uncertain terms that they are claiming that it was no true baptism at all. As such, the baptism that they are about to accept is not “rebaptism,” and the term rebaptism should thus not be used to describe it. Indeed, all language of “rebaptism” should be dropped. I have used it thus far only to indicate this prac-

¹¹ See Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 299. Cf. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), Baptism IV.A.13: “Baptism is an unrepeatable act. Any practice which might be interpreted as ‘re-baptism’ must be avoided.”

tice that I believe to be an aberration. No one is to be “rebaptized.” But suppose, after full consideration, a person does so insist and the church proceeds with the baptism. If other congregants and witnesses were present for or know about the candidate’s false baptism from years before, then the minister must clarify to all what is happening and why the original immersion was not in fact a genuine baptism.

Since it is common for those desiring rebaptism to attribute much of their concern to premature baptism, and to the degree that this is a valid concern, then there are at least a couple of things that churches can do now in preparing young believers for baptism. First, thoughtful consideration should be given to the proper age for receiving baptism. For children growing up in church who, from the time they could speak, have said that they believe in Jesus, there is no need to rush. Most parents and ministers already understand the need for patience, since very few are willing to baptize an earnest six-year-old who requests it. The simple point here is that more time should be allowed for the process of maturing. If this is the most monumental decision of one’s life, then most nine-year-olds are not ready to make it. We generally expect a minimal maturity, often reflected by age and experience, for making other lifelong commitments. If a mature eleven-year-old said that he found the girl that he is going to marry, and he is going to remain committed only to her, and marry her as soon as he possibly can, I would commend him for his forward thinking but also advise him to take his time in order to understand better what he is getting into. On the other hand, if a mature 25-year-old said the exact same thing, I would feel more confident in his choice. I am not suggesting that no nine-year-old should be baptized or that one must wait until age eighteen. Rather, as parents and the church teach their youth about baptism and commend the way of Jesus, they can also work over the long term to raise the bar of maturity and understanding going into baptism, when the child’s inherited, implicit faith has begun the transition toward one’s own explicit faith.¹²

¹² For many in Churches of Christ, this call for delay raises the concern about the status of a believing child who has not been baptized. This related but distinct question is not the focus of this article, and so, for the sake of space, I must leave the issue here with these two assertions: 1) a sound, biblical theology of children and their status in the church has, to my knowledge, not been well articulated in Churches of

This patience or allotment of time leads to the second suggestion. Especially for young believers who have requested baptism—the group most likely to later cite their premature baptism as a reason for rebaptism—this time of waiting should be filled with catechesis in the faith. Bible reading and discussion of the story of salvation, along with how baptism fits into it, should be a regular feature in this time of preparation.¹³ In addition to teaching about the faith and about baptism, the commonly cited lack of knowledge regarding the commitment to discipleship can be remedied by teaching as much about discipleship as about baptism. Candidates for baptism should be not only instructed in the efficacy of baptism, but also engaged in discussion of passages such as Mark 8–10 and Luke 14 on the cost of discipleship. If a person cannot suggest concrete ways that discipleship will shape one’s life immediately and in the future, then that person may not be prepared for baptism. The passage of time and progress in understanding can cause one to forget or underestimate what one knew at an earlier stage of life. Because of this forgetfulness, it is helpful to have the candidate prepare a written statement that summarizes why she wants to be baptized and what she understands about the gospel, baptism, and the life of discipleship. As an adult, the doubter will have a tangible reminder of what she articulated and, I would assume in most cases, be pleasantly surprised at the level of understanding. Candidates for baptism—especially younger ones—must be told that they are not now the same person they will be in ten or twenty years. Their intellectual and spiritual progress does not nullify their baptism.

In sum, those who were baptized at an early age, if they expressed penitent faith in Christ as Lord and Son of God, need not doubt the efficacy of what God has accomplished in them by grace through faith. Years of progress in understanding and sanctification should not bring uncertainty about God’s promise; the growth is simply the fruit of an inchoate but real, personal faith that was present at baptism. People change; God’s promise to the believer does not. For those who have received multiple immersions, they can

Christ; 2) like infants of believers, children who believe and are making their pilgrimage toward baptism and discipleship are saved.

¹³ Among the good materials that families could read and discuss together are Michael Weed and Jeffrey Peterson, eds., *Things that Matter: A Guide to Christian Faith*, 3rd ed. (Austin: Christian Studies Press, 2000); and Allan J. McNicol, *Preparing for Baptism: Becoming Part of the Story of the People of God* (Austin: Christian Studies Press, 2001).

allow that only one of these was the true baptism. At the same time, the concern about premature baptism is appropriate, and churches should take steps to avoid multiplying half-converted disciples. We must acknowledge that, especially in our day, believers, both before and after their baptism, need more—not less—instruction in the faith and in faithful living.

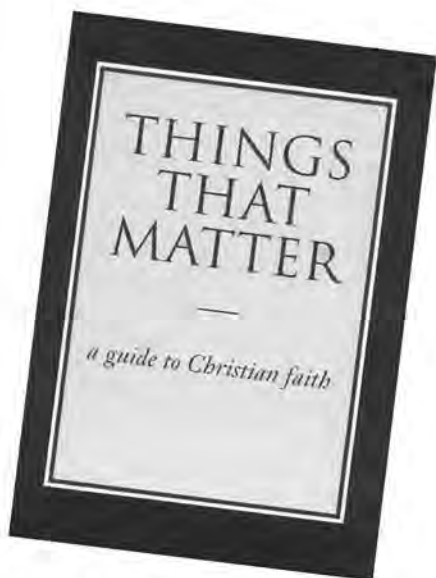
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Luther also battled doubt and dejection about himself as a sinner before God. It is said that in such moments he would take chalk and write I AM BAPTIZED on his desk. Luther has been quoted as saying that baptism is “a shield against all assaults of the scornful enemy, an answer to the sins that disturb the conscience, an antidote for the dread of death and judgment, and a comfort in every temptation.”

When reading Colossians 3:1–4, I thought about Luther’s exclamation, “I am baptized!” Luther’s bold affirmation is consistent with Paul’s message to the new Christians in Colossae. Paul urged them to continue living up to their conversion from a lifestyle that was entangled in the ways of the world to one immersed in Christ and his ways.

Luther, like Paul, understood that the transition of changing one’s allegiance from the ways of the world to the ways of Christ has its challenges. Christian conversion and living require divine gifts and resources. In this passage, Paul presents baptism as a gift of God that keeps on giving. But it is a gift that we should hold on to and contemplate often. In the same way, Luther appealed to baptism as a spiritual resource to sustain him and others in their efforts to be faithful to Christ on a daily basis.

A close reading of the first two chapters of Colossians reveals that a teacher or teachers had come into the church and were causing its members to question the reliability of their conversion and the validity of their experience in Christ. Paul gives several clues to the content being taught. It appears that the teachers believed that more than Christ and his work were necessary for them to be fully enlightened and assured of a secure place with God in heaven.

The seriousness of the matter is summed up in 2:18–19: “Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.” In the next three verses, Paul emphasizes that what one *believes* affects how one *behaves*. In other words, the *content* of one’s Christian faith does guide the quality of one’s Christian *conduct*. Thus, Paul insists that they will not be able to effectively practice their faith without a good understanding of Christ and trusting in him alone.

The opposing teachers' message seems also to claim that there were malicious powers in the celestial regions that worked to prevent Christians from reaching God. Paul wrote to assure the young Christians that they had been set free *from* those malicious powers that sought to enslave them. Paul, like them, knew the joy of being “rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13). He reminded them that they “were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,” but because of Jesus' work, and by following his way, Christians can be made “holy and blameless and irreproachable before [God]” (1:21).

Because of the deceptive teaching being promoted in the Colossian church, Paul stressed that Christians not only are set free *from* such malicious powers, but also are set free *for* a life with Christ that is morally pure. He is well aware that although Christians are set free *from* evil through God's grace and mercy, the power behind the old ways would still hang around and attempt to lure them back into sinful ways. Those ways are destructive and deadly. Faithful response to God's grace and mercy requires effort to live *for* Christ. This is not to imply that we in any way earn our salvation. It does mean that we must appreciate and carefully guard this gift.

So Paul reminded the Colossians of the truth that there are two ways to live life. One way of life focuses on Christ and consciously chooses to obey his will for us. The other way of life is concerned with the habits of the world and consciously chooses to disobey Christ. The point is succinctly made in 1:13–14: “[God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13–14).

Therefore, maintaining one's allegiance to Christ requires spiritual resources in order to sustain such a momentous decision and commitment. In our sermon text (3:1–4), it is interesting that Paul alludes to baptism before he gives the twin commands to “seek” and to “set their minds” on the things above. When Paul reminds the Colossians that they “have been raised with Christ” (3:1) he prompts them to remember the spiritual experience and to claim the spiritual resource that they received in baptism. It is, in fact, superior to anything that the opposing teaching offers.

Earlier, in 2:12, Paul used the same language of being “raised” to point them back to their baptism: “When you were buried with him in baptism,

you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised [Jesus] from the dead.” This is a very strong and positive statement about what God does for sinners in baptism. The very same power that God exerted to raise Jesus from the dead is applied to believers in baptism. Remembering their baptism would not only remind them of their new identity and status in Christ, but it would also be a resource for them to live up to their calling and commitment to Christ.

In 3:3, Paul affirms two facts about their new existence in Christ: they have *died* and they are now *hidden* with Christ in God. I read somewhere that the first-century Greeks would refer to someone who had died and was buried as being “hidden in the earth.” But Paul claims that baptized Christians have died and have been hidden with Christ in God. Once again, Christians who had been led to question their security in Christ are now encouraged to remember their baptism and claim the promises and security that they received there.

Death, burial, and resurrection are at the heart of the Christian gospel. Jesus was recognized as the Savior and proclaimed as the Lord because of his death, burial, and resurrection. Death, burial, and resurrection are important aspects of Christian conversion. Paul emphasizes all three in the four verses of our sermon text. This is the content of what they had heard and believed when the gospel was proclaimed in Colossae. As I mentioned earlier, content affects conduct; belief informs behavior. Understanding the implications of death, burial, and resurrection assist Christians in their practice of the faith.

As Paul says in 3:3, Christians have died and are hidden in Christ. However, in 3:4, he assures them that there is a day coming when Christ, who gives them life, will be revealed. It is not until then that Christians will also be revealed with him in glory. Jesus himself has triumphed over the malicious spiritual powers that oppose God and God’s people. Knowing this enables Christians to draw on the spiritual resources needed in order to be faithful in their practice of the faith.

There is a malicious power still at work that attempts to thwart God’s purposes on earth and especially in the church. And old earthly habits are hard to break. So the church has always been in a struggle against the work of those powers. As I’ve been emphasizing throughout this sermon, we as the

church have the spiritual resources to seek and set our minds on the things above if we will claim what God provides in Christ.

From 3:5 through 4:6, Paul focuses on examples of what conduct must be laid aside and what must be put on. Paul might take issue with the language of my earlier statement that old habits are hard to break. He uses an imperative in verse 5 that is very descriptive: “Put to death, therefore, whatever is earthly in you.” Paul would not say that we must break our old habits or sins. He insists that we must kill them.

I have a friend living with cancer. Surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy have been used in an effort to eradicate the cancer growing in his body. He has described the goal of the medical strategy as “murdering” the malignant cells. That is not far from what Paul is saying when he insists that Christians and the church put to death whatever is earthly in us.

Having established that Christians are now secure and hidden with Christ by virtue of having died, been buried, and raised with Christ in baptism, Paul turns to the ethical implications of their baptisms starting with 3:5. He lists vices and virtues in order to illustrate and practically apply those implications.

The ethical discussion is set in the context of relationships with all people (3:5–7), with the church (3:8–17 and 4:2–4), within families (3:18–21), those involving occupational and professional roles (3:22–4:1), and with society at large (4:5–6). Along with the affirmation of grace in 3:1–4 comes this word of judgment in the remainder of the chapter as emphasized in verse 6: “On account of these [sins] the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.”

God’s wrath is not vindictive or impulsive, as some think. Wrath is built into and is the natural consequence of sin and the behaviors that arise from it. Paul elaborates more fully on God’s wrath in Romans 1. Three times in that chapter (verses 24, 26, and 28) Paul gives explicit descriptions of how God allows people to reap the bad consequences of behavior that is self-centered and disobedient to God’s way. Commenting on those verses, Tom Wright uses a memorable phrase: “Evil is what you get when the mind is twisted out of shape and the body goes along for the ride.”

Immoral behavior like that identified in Romans 1 and Colossians 3 is not consistent with the Christian life. With Paul, we need to understand that human life has been perverted from God's original intention for it. That is what he means when he urges Christians not to set their minds on the things of the earth in Colossians 3:2. Doing so naturally incurs wrath.

However, wrath is an aspect of God's love. We should not forget that Jesus' parable commonly called "The Prodigal Son" assures us that God's love is never withdrawn from his wayward children who choose to live in the far country. The prodigal son tasted the bitterness of the wrath that was the natural consequence of choosing to live outside his father's protective care and oversight. Even prodigals can return to the power of their baptism, once again renounce evil and sin, and be who they were called to be in baptism. Luther said, "Baptism is never useless unless you despair and refuse to return to its salvation. You may indeed wander away from the sign [of baptism] for a time, but the sign is not therefore useless."

In Colossians 3, Paul uses another strong and evocative word to describe the ethical expectations inherent in Christian conversion. In verses 9 and 10, he employs the image of stripping off the old self and being clothed with the new self. This is likely another allusion to baptism as practiced in the early church. At baptism, a person would strip off the clothes worn to the ceremony. Those clothes would be laid aside and not put on again. The act vividly illustrated that those clothes and the way of life lived in those clothes were no longer a part of the new Christian's identity. Emerging from the baptismal waters, the Christian was given a new set of clean, white clothes. Again, the symbolism is vivid. Just as the person had been washed clean of sin in the waters of baptism, the new clothes symbolized that a new way of life marked by purity had begun and would need to be maintained.

Some church traditions include renunciations of sin and evil along with the affirmation of faith when baptizing converts. Those presenting themselves for baptism are addressed by the one presiding at the baptismal ceremony with these words:

*I ask you to reject sin,
 profess your faith in Christ Jesus,
 and confess the faith of the church.*

Upon confession of faith in Christ, the one to be baptized is requested to make renunciations against evil and sin. He or she is asked:

*Do you renounce evil and its power in the world, which defy God's righteousness and love?*²

The baptismal candidate replies:

I renounce them.

A second question is asked:

Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God?

The baptismal candidate replies:

I renounce them.

A third question is asked:

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and savior?

The baptismal candidate replies:

*I do.*²

Renunciation implies changing one's allegiance from the ways of the world to the ways of Christ, which has its challenges. Christian conversion and living faithfully requires divine gifts and resources. Baptism is a gift of God that keeps on giving. It is a gift that we should hold on to and contemplate often. That is why Luther knew to use baptism as a spiritual resource to sustain him and others in their efforts to be faithful to Christ on a daily basis.

Luther did not say, "I *was* baptized." He intentionally exclaimed "I *am* baptized!" His exclamation is consistent with the realities of baptism as described by Paul in Colossians. The blessings received and the responsibilities accepted at the time of baptism are not limited to that moment, but continue with the Christian all the way to death. Baptism was received in the past, but its purpose and meaning continue into the present and guide us into the future.

The benefits and blessings of baptism include forgiveness of sins, deliverance from evil and death, and the promise of eternal salvation. Baptism is not only a work of justification, but also the beginning of sanctification. We are

² Cf. BCW, opt 2, 1993 ed.

assured that our sins are washed away in the waters of baptism. Although the struggle with sin continues, we are assured that our Father forgives and through his Spirit empowers us to overcome. That is why Paul describes his proclamation as warning and teaching toward the goal of becoming mature in Christ (Col 1:28).

Remembering our baptism and often exclaiming, “I am baptized!” (even silently) can be a great help in times of temptation or victory, sorrow or joy, and at the time of our death. While writing this sermon I took a black permanent marker and a white 3x5 index card. Like Luther, I inscribed on it, I AM BAPTIZED! The card now sits beside my computer. It will be a regular reminder that with every breath I take I receive the benefits and blessings of my baptism. It is also a reminder that I made both vows and renunciations at the time of my baptism.

For those who are baptized, you might want to make your own visual reminder that will help you to remember your baptism and be thankful. For those who have not been baptized, you might want to explore further the meaning and blessings found in Christian baptism. What great blessing, comfort, and motivation come from the simple exclamation, “I am baptized!”

Tradition vs. Traditionalism

Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.

Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)*

One Baptism

We confess one baptism for remission of sins.

Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol (381)

Baptism: God's Work in Us

Such is the power of faith in Him, such the excess of His grace. And as the element of fire, when it meets with ore from the mine, straightway of earth makes it gold, even so and much more Baptism makes those who are washed to be of gold instead of clay, the Spirit at that time falling like fire into our souls, burning up the 'image of the earthy' (1 Cor. 15:49), and producing 'the image of the heavenly,' fresh coined, bright and glittering, as from the furnace-mould....

"For even in these mystical blessings, it is, on the one hand, God's part to give the grace, on the other, man's to supply faith.... In order to preserve our purity, it is not sufficient for us merely to have been baptized and to have believed, but we must, if we will continually enjoy this brightness, display a life worthy of it. This then is God's work in us. To have been born the mystical Birth, and to have been cleansed from all our former sins, comes from Baptism; but to remain for the future pure, never again after this to admit any stain, belongs to our own power and diligence.

John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. John* (ca. 391)

Immersion: A True and Complete Sign of the Thing It Signifies

Baptism [*Die Taufe*] is *baptismos* in Greek, and *mersio* in Latin, and means to plunge something completely into the water, so that the water covers it.... It would be proper, according to the meaning of the word *Taufe*, that the infant, or whoever is to be baptized, should be put in and sunk completely into the water and then drawn out again. For even in the German tongue the word *Taufe* comes undoubtedly from the word *tief* [deep] and means that what is baptized is sunk deeply into the water. This usage is demanded by the significance of baptism itself. For baptism, as we shall hear, signifies that the old man and the sinful birth of flesh and blood are to be wholly drowned by the grace of God. We should therefore do justice to its meaning and make baptism a true and complete sign of the thing it signifies....

The lifting up out of the baptismal water is quickly done, but the thing it signifies—the spiritual birth and the increase of grace and righteousness—even though it begins in baptism, lasts until death, indeed, until the Last Day.

Martin Luther, *The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism* (1519)

Fellowship with Him in His Death and Resurrection

Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, to be unto the party baptized, a sign of his fellowship with him, in his death and resurrection; of his being engrafted into him; of remission of sins; and of giving up into God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life.

Second London Baptist Confession of Faith

The First Step of Faithfulness

A man's turning to faithfulness to God, and consequently to calling upon Him, is the work of this faithful God which, perfectly accomplished in the history of Jesus Christ, in virtue of the awakening, quickening and illuminating power of this history, becomes a new beginning of life as his baptism with the Holy Spirit.

The first step of this life of faithfulness to God, the Christian life, is a man's baptism with water, which by his own decision is requested of the community and which is administered by the community, as the binding confession of his obedience, conversion and hope, made in prayer for God's grace, wherein he honours the freedom of this grace.

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/4 (1967)

The Seal of Common Discipleship

The Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of people before, in and after their baptism. It is the same Spirit who revealed Jesus as the Son (Mark 1:10–11) and who empowered and united the disciples at Pentecost (Acts 2). God bestows upon all baptized persons the anointing and the promise of the Holy Spirit, marks them with a seal and implants in their hearts the first instalment of their inheritance as sons and daughters of God. The Holy Spirit nurtures the life of faith in their hearts until the final deliverance when they will enter into its full possession, to the praise of the glory of God (II Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:13-14).

Administered in obedience to our Lord, baptism is a sign and seal of our common discipleship. Through baptism, Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place. Our common baptism, which unites us to Christ in faith, is thus a basic bond of unity.

Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry (1982)



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Contributors

M. Todd Hall is Director of the Library and Assistant Professor at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor Emeritus of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Daniel Austin Napier is Associate Professor of Theology at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Jeffrey Peterson is Jack C. and Ruth Wright Professor of New Testament at Austin Graduate School of Theology

Stanley G. Reid is President of Austin Graduate School of Theology

Keith D. Stanglin is Professor of Historical Theology at Austin Graduate School of Theology