

CHRISTIAN STUDIES

SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE CHURCH

A PUBLICATION OF THE FACULTY OF AUSTIN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Volume 29 / 2017

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Christian Studies (ISSN-4125) is a publication of the faculty of Austin Graduate School of Theology. *Christian Studies* is funded by gifts from readers and friends of the graduate school. Subscription is free upon request. Back issues are available for \$3.00 each, plus postage. Correspondence should be addressed to M. Todd Hall, Austin Graduate School of Theology, 7640 Guadalupe Street, Austin, Texas 78752. *Christian Studies* is indexed in ATLA Religion Database. Copyright Institute for Christian Studies. FAX: (512) 476-3919. Web Site: www.austingrad.edu. Email: christianstudiespress@austingrad.edu.

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Volume 29

2017

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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.

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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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