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# Baptism Yesterday and Today

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Allan J. McNicol

When a convert in the third century presented himself or herself as desirous of baptism, a definite sequence of events would occur. These took place in three stages: (1) preparation; (2) the conduct of the actual rite itself; (3) post baptismal activities. This sequence was designed to emphasize baptism as a transition from allegiance to one way of life to a new way which was oriented in a very different direction. Indeed, at the heart of the significance of baptism in the ancient church was an emphasis on the fact that a conscious personal choice to renounce one lord and take up allegiance to another was being effectuated. This can be seen in the three stages of the observance of the rite.

First, the actual preparation for baptism could be viewed from both long and short term perspectives. During this era, when becoming a Christian meant that one (as in China today) faced the prospect of martyrdom, it was wise for the community of faith to be sure that a prospective convert had genuinely repented; for one had to be ready to accept the consequences of living in an alternative community to the world of rampant idolatry and its closely intertwined culture of hedonistic lifestyles. Thus, besides asking a potential convert to undergo a considerable period of teaching, leaders of the church would often seek to determine whether his occupation may present a barrier to discipleship. He would also

need to show evidence that his life was truly moving in a new direction by such actions as engaging in Christian charitable works.<sup>1</sup>

In the days prior to baptism, perhaps in imitation of Christ's own test before his ministry, the new believer would undergo an intensive period of prayer and fasting.<sup>2</sup> Often, especially if this were before Easter Sunday, the time of prayer and fasting would culminate in an lengthy vigil in readiness for the baptism to take place at dawn.<sup>3</sup>

The conduct of a baptism at first light was a point of considerable significance for the early Christians. The candidate first faced toward the West (the direction of the darkness) and renounced Satan and his control. Then he would turn toward the East (the direction of the coming light) and confess Christ.<sup>4</sup> What is highlighted in this action is the dramatic contrast between the past and the future. As the believer was lowered into the water the old life was, in actuality, being buried; and through the action of God in the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, the new Christian was about to emerge from the watery grave.<sup>5</sup>

The reality that ancient baptism functioned dramatically as a radical transition from one manner of life to another was also highlighted in the practices that took place immediately after baptism. The new Christian would be presented with a white tunic as a symbol of the moral and spiritual cleansing that marked the beginning of his or her new life. This image of cleansing was strengthened by the acknowledgment of the coming of the Holy Spirit either by some form of anointing of the new believer or by the laying on of hands by a leader of the church.

Thus, a common emphasis throughout the entire process of baptism in the ancient church was upon the radical difference which occurred in

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel D. Stevnick, "Baptism," *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship* ed. Peter E. Fink (Collegeville, Minnesota: Glazier/Liturgical Press, 1990) 93.

<sup>2</sup> Didache 1:7; Justin, *Apology* 1:61; Tertullian, *On Baptism* 19-20.

<sup>3</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism* 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> Stevnick, "Baptism," 92; Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition* 21.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. E. Ferguson, "Baptism," *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity* ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc. 1990) 131-134.

one's outlook when one crossed the border between the old life and entered a new one. This was marked by the action of being buried in water and, through divine action, spiritually engrafted into Christ. Such an image still resonates in many communities today where the gospel is proclaimed and received by persons who had been untouched or unreached previously by the impact of its claim. A number of years ago this author lived in a very secular community in a large city in Australia. A family, who had only the barest acquaintance with Christianity, was taught the gospel by the minister of the church and became Christians. The very center of their house, the focal point of its architecture, was an entire room built to function as a large bar. It was noticeable in a visit to the house a month or so after the baptism of these people that the bar was gone. The room was totally renovated. In place of the large supply of liquor a number of bottles of fruit juices and similar items were tastefully visible. Baptism, then and now, can make a major difference in our live.

### *Analysis and Proposal*

In Churches of Christ in contemporary America such stories are unusual. Most members of Churches of Christ live in a version of cultural Christianity. Indeed the preponderance of baptisms that take place in the church today are not of converts but the children of believers who, at a stage of maturing to adulthood, elect to be baptized as a sign that they are prepared to take on the full responsibilities of membership in the church. In these cases baptism is not the marking of a radical transition from one culture and lifestyle to another but a ritualizing of the culminating point of early childhood training and nurture within both the child's natural and spiritual family. Several issues arise as to whether this vastly different social situation, where baptism functions as a pledge of acceptance of the responsibilities of church membership rather than a reflection of the

transition of loyalty from one lord to another, need to be explored.<sup>6</sup> However, that will not be the direction taken in this essay. Rather, some aspects of the theology of baptism in the New Testament will be examined; and then, some suggestions will be made about how our contemporary practice of baptism may be improved so that it may be carried out in keeping with the essence of biblical theology. Procedurally, first to be discussed will be the origins of baptism in the Christian movement highlighting why it plays such a pivotal role in New Testament theology. Following this overview a brief note will show how the importance of this reality has been appropriated by the Restoration Movement. In conclusion we will offer some brief suggestions as to how baptism ought to be observed in keeping with the central emphasis of scripture and tradition.

The thesis will be argued that intrinsic to baptism is the idea that it marks a point of transition from one way of life to another. As it emerged in the early church, baptism was the vehicle wherein one entered into the death of Christ and emerged from the watery grave to share the new life with and in Him. In an era in which some Churches of Christ are tempted to embrace many of the trappings of generic Evangelicalism in order to be in solidarity with a larger number of Christians in the wider ecumenical community, there has been a tendency to downplay the centrality of our witness on baptism. This study is designed to underscore that our traditional understanding of believers' baptism rests at the very heart of our communal

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<sup>6</sup> We have in mind such questions as whether the children of believers who have grown up always loyal to Christ are perceived to be in the same spiritual condition as those whom we have traditionally called "the alien sinner." Do these vastly different social realities mean anything as far as the way we ritualize baptisms? In generic Evangelicalism some of these issues are discussed by Marlin Jeschke, *Believer's Baptism for Children of the Church* (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1983). In Churches of Christ James Thompson, "The Education of Children in the Early Church," *ICS Faculty Bulletin* 4 (November, 1983) 12-29, has reopened the modern discussion. Now a Doctor of ministry project at Abilene Christian University by Tommy King entitled, *Faith Decisions: Christian Initiation for Children of the Glenwood Church of Christ*, treats the subject with greater detail. King argues that children raised within the church should be viewed in the same way as catechumens were perceived within the church of the second and third centuries. That is, the catechumen was one who had already entered the pathway of discipleship and was viewed as being brought along to a more mature level of faith under the aegis of the church. Cf. G.R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 373. As the ancient catechumens, so our children look to the time when their mature faith can be expressed in baptism, and they can enter fully into the life of Christ, as he exists corporally in his body—the church.

identity. It should be maintained as one of the most important treasures we have to offer to the common faith of the church.

### Baptism as Transition in the New Testament

Within Churches of Christ it is customary to turn to the book of Acts to understand the origins of baptism. Thus, our theological understanding of this rite is traced back through the conversion stories in Acts to Luke's account of the response to Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:37-42). However, this is an abrupt introduction to the subject and one must go back to some important earlier happenings.

#### *The Mission of John of the Baptist*

John the Baptist inaugurated the eschatological events of the New Testament era. He announced that a dramatic new day was about to dawn in Israel. Central to this day would be the re-gathering of Israel as the people or kingdom of God (Mt. 3:1-2).<sup>7</sup> What was needed was that there be some who would be prepared for this time. In face of the terrible judgment that the unprepared would face on this day the business-as-usual keeping of the temple observances and traditional aspects of covenant was not enough. John called for genuine repentance expressed in a baptism for the forgiveness of sins (Lk. 3:3).

Not only was this a slap at the religious leadership in Jerusalem (one needed to do more than go to the temple to be saved) it also had definite overtones of radical revision or re-constitution of Israel itself.<sup>8</sup> As Israel had passed through the waters in leaving Egypt (I Cor. 10:1-2) as a prelude to reception and ratification of the covenant at Sinai (Ex. 24:7-8), so John claimed that Israel must pass through the waters again to be ready for the time of the New Covenant. Thus, already in the baptism of John, the

<sup>7</sup> Cf. G. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*. Trans. by J. P. Galvin (New York: Paulist, 1984) 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> Ben Meyer, "Jesus Christ," *Anchor Bible* 3. ed. D. N. Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 778.

concept of baptism as a transition is present. In order for Israel to be ready for the new era or covenant it too must pass through the waters of baptism.<sup>9</sup>

*Jesus Inaugurates a New Covenant*

For a while Jesus joined John and conducted a similar mission which involved baptism (John 3:22-24). Jesus himself was baptized and about that time John was imprisoned and eventually killed. Jesus would pick up where John left off and would not only anticipate but inaugurate the New Covenant.

The road to the inauguration of the New Covenant was the ministry of Jesus. One observation about his ministry is necessary for our purposes. As Jesus' ministry unfolded it became clear that a large segment of Israel would not receive his claim that the people of God must first be renewed and reconstituted in light of the dawn of a new era. Israel remained bent on following a rebellious course that Jesus considered would lead to the destruction of the nation (Lk. 13:3-9). As the Passover celebration came near and Jesus anticipated a visit to Jerusalem he began to be overwhelmed by the possibility of martyrdom. This concern is echoed in what has come to be called the Passion predictions (Mt. 16:21; Mk. 8:31; Mt. 17:22-23; Mk. 9:31-32; Lk. 9:44-48; Mt. 20:17-19; Mk. 10:33-34; Lk. 18:31-34). But this martyrdom would not be without value. In God's eyes he was a representative figure on behalf of Israel. In his death he would suffer, as a representative, the same fate that his people had suffered earlier in the exile and he would become the agent who would serve as the ransom to save others from undergoing destruction (Mt. 20:28; Mk. 10:45). Thus, at the last supper the sum of his words over the bread and the cup was to announce that in his death the New Covenant would be inaugurated; and in his

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<sup>9</sup> For a recent study on the antecedents to John's baptism see Bo Reicke, "The Historical Setting of John's Baptism," *Jesus, the Gospels, and the Church: Essays in Honor of W. R. Farmer*, ed. E. P. Sanders (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1987) 209-224.

invitation to receive the bread and the cup, in an anticipatory sense, the disciples would be the first to receive the benefits.

And, so we return to baptism. In Jesus' death the blood and water came from his side (Jn. 19:34). Now baptism (i.e., the baptism of John) which functioned originally as the appropriate prelude to the reception of the blessings of the New Covenant, with the inauguration of the New Covenant is re-conceived as the vehicle by which one initially is brought into the restored people of God. Solidarity with the people of God results in the benefits of forgiveness of sins and a new life intrinsic to the covenant.<sup>10</sup> Baptism now is "into the name (or sphere) of Jesus' authority." It is precisely this understanding of baptism that Peter invokes on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38). Rebellious Israel, who only a few days earlier had been complicit in the crucifixion of the Messiah, was now invited to share the benefits of the New Covenant inaugurated by his death. Here again the theme of transition emerges as something of paramount importance. The Old Covenant has passed away and a new one has come. Israel is invited through baptism to enter into the blessings of a new life in Jesus.

*Incorporation into Christ: The Centrality of Baptism for Paul*

The benefits of the new life in Christ were not only made available to the people of Israel. Very soon the Gentiles were incorporated into the people of God (Acts 10:1-11:18). Of course it was Paul who became the great missionary of record to the Gentiles. He is remembered for his dogged determination to ensure that no unnecessary encumbrances would be placed upon any potential follower of Jesus with respect to what was needed to become a Christian. For him, baptism as the outward expression of obedient faith was the *sine qua non* occurrence in the process of becoming a Christian.

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<sup>10</sup> On how this connects with the rebirth of mission both to Israel and the Gentiles see Ben Meyer, "The Expiation Motif in the Eucharistic Words: A Key to the History of Jesus?" *Gregorianum* 69/3 (1988) 476-477.

This is so because for Paul baptism was the pathway which led one to interface directly with the salvific actions of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Specifically, it was through baptism that one died with Christ and arose to live as a vital part of the new creation brought about by the impact of his life.

In 2 Corinthians 5:14 is a very important word. There Paul says bluntly, "because he (i.e. Christ) died 'on behalf of' all, as a consequence, all died." It is in this profound passage that Paul gives one of his most vivid lessons, in spelling out the significance of Christ's death. Paul is saying that, in some representative sense, in Jesus' death at Golgotha the whole of humanity died.<sup>11</sup> Here Paul echoes *both* the themes of the solidarity of the human in the two pivotal representative figures of Adam and Christ *and* the Old Testament Day of Atonement imagery wherein the sacrificial victim vicariously embodied the death of the people. But Paul does not leave the matter there. In 2 Corinthians 5:15 he recalls that Christ's death eventuated in his coming to a new life. And the new life was for the express purpose that the ones for whom Christ died may live with him (1 Thes. 5:10). Paul's point is that all those who share Christ's death in baptism are destined to share with him his transformed life. As when we were in the sphere of Adam we shared his fate so, in Christ, beginning with baptism, we share his status of a transformed life.<sup>12</sup> Literally, Paul is pointing to the reality of nothing less than a new creation which has been brought into effect through the death of Christ (2 Cor. 5:18-21; Rom. 5:6-11; Eph. 2:14-18).

This brings us to Romans 6:3-6, the classic text of Paul on baptism. In this text there are three central themes that are to be stressed in every baptism. First, when one is lowered into the water we understand this to be a death. Paul refers to this as a burial of our old lives (Rom. 6:4). Assuming this is done with genuine repentance one can scarcely conceive of a more

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<sup>11</sup> Morna Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel: New Testament Interpretations of the Death of Christ* (Carlisle, Cumbria, United Kingdom: Paternoster Press, 1994) 36.

<sup>12</sup> Hooker, *Not Ashamed of the Gospel*, 38.

vivid expression of the intent to change from allegiance to one set of ultimates for another.

Second, upon being buried in the waters of baptism, the converts in the first century were conceived as being engrafted into the domain of Christ, as he dwells corporately in his body the Church (Rom. 6:4; 1 Cor. 12:13). In a later Pauline letter it is called a “washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). By joining his or her death to Jesus’ death the believer becomes one with him in both his faithfulness and ultimate destiny.

Third, the early Christian converts emerged from baptism having made the transition to a new life (Rom. 6:4). Paul was very careful to say that this was a new revitalized form of life; yet it was hidden in Christ, and was not the final state of glorification that will only come at the final resurrection (Rom. 6:5). Nevertheless, it is a concrete relationship where the renewed believer now lives as though one had made a total transition into an entire new family. In this family the believer has become a child of God. Without question, for Paul, at the heart of it all was the conviction that every believer would carry the belief that in baptism he has moved from a mode of earthly existence into participation in the divine life itself.

### **Baptism as Transition in the Restoration Tradition**

We have substantiated the importance in both Scripture and the common faith of the early church of baptism as marking the transition of the believer into the sphere of Christ. It is not late breaking news to note that this also has been a central emphasis of the Campbell-Stone Restoration Movement. Three quotes from authors in this Tradition say it all.

Alexander Campbell struggled mightily throughout his life to arrive eventually at the position that the scriptures taught that biblical baptism

consisted of the immersion of penitent believers for the remission of sins.<sup>13</sup> As an exegete who was always sensitive to types and shadows of the New Covenant found in the Old Testament, Campbell found the purpose of the baptism already foreshadowed in the cultic practices of the temple.

That is, Christian immersion stands in relation to the same place in the Christian temple, or worship, that the laver or bath of purification stood in the Jewish temple; viz. between the sacrifice of Christ and acceptable worship.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, in order to make the transition from contact with the efficacious death to the way of acceptable worship one is called upon to pass through the waters of baptism. This point was also driven home in the standard text on biblical theology of the nineteenth-century Restoration Movement.

A little reflection on the meaning and force of the preposition "into" will enable us to perceive and comprehend the force of the Apostles argument. It is a particle of *transition*, and always implies a change of state, and hence, also, a change of influences. Thus, for instance when a man, in order to avoid the violence of a storm, enters into a house, he is shielded and protected by the house; . . . just so the man who is, by the divine arrangement, baptized *into* the death of Christ is made to enjoy all the benefits of his death.<sup>15</sup>

Similar sentiments are expressed by the twentieth-century Australian Restorationist author E. Lyall Williams:

When the phrase has been used "baptism unto remission of sins," it has always been an elliptical statement carrying with it the

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<sup>13</sup> A very informative account of the Campbell odyssey on baptism is given by John Mark Hicks, "The Recovery of the ancient Gospel: Alexander Campbell and the design of Baptism," in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective*. ed. David Fletcher (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1990) 111-170.

<sup>14</sup> A. Campbell, *Christian Baptist* 5 (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1955 reprint of the 1827-28 Periodical) 128-129.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Milligan, *An Exposition and Defense of the Scheme of Redemption as it is Revealed and Taught in the Holy Scriptures* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 11th edition of the 1868 work) 407.

understanding that it is baptism *into Christ* which is unto the remission of sins.<sup>16</sup>

Without question the testimony of scripture, the common faith of the early church, and the Restoration Movement agree that baptism is *the point of transition* where the believer “puts on Christ” and takes upon himself or herself the beginning of the movement into the divine life.

### Baptism and Contemporary Liturgy

Given this reality, the question may be raised as to the most appropriate way of observing baptism in the local church today.

First, it should be noted that the widespread practice of private baptisms ought to be discouraged. Such practices undermine the dimension of baptism as an entrance into the body of Christ. All baptisms, unless there is a compelling set of special circumstances, should be done during an assembly of the church.

The most appropriate time on Sunday morning is directly after the word has been proclaimed. Baptism is the response *par excellence* to the proclamation of the word. The candidate for baptism can respond to the invitation during a hymn, make a public confession of the Lordship of Jesus, and then be baptized.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, the one baptized may return to the assembly and, after being welcomed by a leader of the congregation, participate in the Lord’s Supper.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> E. L. Williams, *A Biblical Approach to Unity* (Melbourne: Austral Printing and Publishing Co., 1957) 152.

<sup>17</sup> In most Churches of Christ today the invitation is a practice seeking a rationale. In an overwhelming number of instances the minister of the local church knows ahead of time when someone is about to be baptized. Thus the response to the invitation should be ritualized as the culmination of a period of preparation for baptism rather than the revivalist mode of an immediate response to a particular message.

<sup>18</sup> An advantage of knowing ahead of time that there will be a baptism is that one can plan the liturgy so that the baptism takes place after the word has been proclaimed but before the Lord’s Supper is taken. Throughout Christian history the observance of the Lord’s Supper represents the apex of the liturgical movement of the service. There is no reason why this should not be so in our services. Immediately after the baptism an appropriate hymn followed by a short word or reading of Scripture should allow enough time for the one baptized to return to the assembly to share the Lord’s Supper with the entire congregation.

Procedurally, the ritualizing the baptism as transition may incorporate a brief statement by the candidate immediately prior to baptism. This statement would highlight the conviction that a practical reversal of commitments is being undertaken. This would be especially significant with respect to converts.

Finally, after the baptism, when the believer is welcomed to the Lord's Table, it is important that acknowledgment be made that baptism is the occasion for the reception of God's promised gift of the Holy Spirit. This would not only echo an ancient practice in the church; it would be yet another opportunity to emphasize that baptism is the operation of God bringing one into the body of Christ where one is called to serve for the rest of one's days.

### Conclusion

This essay has underscored the importance of baptism for the contemporary church. We have focused on baptism as the transition where one is infused by the Holy Spirit into the divine life of the Son. Our study of baptism in Scripture and Tradition (both in the ancient church and the Restoration Movement) confirms a strong connection between the salvific action of God in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the reception of the benefits of that death by the believer, in the waters of baptism.

Today, when the acids of generic Evangelicalism erode this central belief of Restorationists, it is time that our traditional ideas about baptism be rethought and reclaimed. A wise teacher once remarked that the heritage of one generation cannot be passed on to the next without there being some erosion to that heritage. A heritage, to remain vital and credible, must carry on fresh investigation of even its most cherished tenets. This study is offered to that end.

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