

DUAL-PRACTICE BAPTISM VIEW

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MY TASK IN THIS CHAPTER IS CONSIDERABLY easier than that of my two colleagues, and not just because they have graciously allowed me the privilege of defending the correct view. I also have the advantage of occupying the middle position, which means that they will have argued at length for the validity of baptizing babies and for the value of deferring baptism, both of which I believe in. In this chapter we will begin with the process of becoming a Christian in the New Testament, go on to ask whether the apostolic church baptized babies and conclude with a discussion of some of the theological issues relating to the baptism of babies.

Please permit me first to begin with a word of personal testimony. I was born to nonchurchgoing parents. At the age of three I was baptized in an Anglican church, at my grandmother's urging. Apparently I cried out, "He's not going to pour that water over me!" For a time I thought of this as early evidence of theological discernment, but I now regard it as the folly of youth. The price that my mother had to pay for having me baptized was a promise to seek confirmation. This she did, and it turned us into churchgoers. Much later in life she moved beyond that into a living personal faith.

In due course I myself was converted and went on to study theol-

ogy. I gave little thought to infant baptism, though I saw no point in it. Then while using a commentary by two high-churchmen in my study of Romans chapter 6, it suddenly dawned on me that baptism made perfect sense if confined to believers. I discussed this with friends, who told me that the best defence of infant baptism was Pierre Marcel's *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism: The Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace*.¹ I read it eagerly but decided that the apparently logical argument was flawed by a number of unacknowledged gaps, so Marcel made a Baptist of me. For over thirty years I have belonged to baptistic churches, and my children were not baptized as babies.

At a later stage I read George Beasley-Murray's *Baptism in the New Testament*.² This Baptist author persuaded me that New Testament baptism was not so much believers' baptism as converts' baptism. Thinking about this made me realize that Baptist and paedobaptist practice are alike modifications of this. At the same time I was concerned about the fact that my children appeared to be believers but were not yet baptized, a situation that I could not square with the New Testament. The suggestion that such children should take communion until they were old enough for baptism struck me as hopelessly confused. So Beasley-Murray (with help) moved me away from the Baptist position.

The purpose of this narrative is not just to demonstrate that I am a cussed individual who always reacts against things but also to show that the position argued in this essay comes from having lived and thought within the two opposing positions and having myself found both of them to be wanting.

CHRISTIAN INITIATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

How does one become a Christian? Our discussion of baptism must begin with this fundamental question. What must I do to be saved?

¹Pierre Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism: The Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace* (London: James Clarke, 1953).

²George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Macmillan, 1962).

What needs to happen when someone wishes to respond to the gospel? Or to use the jargon, what is Christian initiation? One way to answer this question is to look at the Acts of the Apostles, where we see the apostles preaching the gospel to unbelievers. In particular fourteen passages narrate how evangelists tell enquirers how to respond or provide a reasonably full account of the conversion of a person or group.³

If we look at these passages and ask what was expected to happen, we find four things that repeatedly occur: repentance, faith, baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit. All four are not mentioned every time, but a clear fourfold pattern emerges.⁴ Faith is mentioned ten times and is found in a variant reading in an eleventh passage (Acts 8:37). Apart from Peter's address in Acts 3 (which the police interrupted), the only place where faith is missing is in two accounts of Paul's conversion (Acts 9:17-18; 22:14-16), though it may safely be assumed that his conversion did involve faith.⁵ Baptism is also mentioned ten times, the exceptions including the incomplete sermon of Acts 3. The other omissions are Acts 15:7-9, referring to the conversion of Cornelius who was in fact baptized (Acts 10:47-48), the sermon on Mars Hill (Acts 17:30-34) and Paul's account of his own teaching in Acts 20:20-21.

That all four things are not mentioned every time shows that Luke was not a pedant, not that all four things did not happen each time. This can be seen from multiple accounts of the same event (conversions of Paul and Cornelius) where different things are mentioned each time. When the apostles suspected that one of these was missing, they took care to remedy the defect (Acts 8:15-17, 20-23; 19:1-7).

³Acts 2:37-41; 3:17-21; 8:12-17, 36-39; 9:17-18; 10:43-48; 11:15-18; 15:7-9; 16:14-15, 30-34; 17:30-34; 19:1-7; 20:20-21; 22:14-16.

⁴James D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (London: SCM Press, 1970), p. 91, sees three elements in Christian initiation: repentance, baptism and the gift of the Spirit. He then states that repentance and faith are "opposite sides of the same coin." It makes more sense to speak of four elements, as does David Pawson, *The Normal Christian Birth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), pp. 9-90.

⁵In Acts 26:15-18 Paul is instructed at his conversion to preach sanctification by faith.

This picture coheres with what we see in the rest of the New Testament, where faith and baptism are like the clichéd two sides of a coin. Baptism is a part of Christian initiation by which people become Christians, but this is not baptism without faith. Baptism is also part of the gospel message. In the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19-20 baptism is commanded, but faith is not even mentioned! For the New Testament writers *faith* means “faith confessed in baptism” and *baptism* means “baptism as a confession of faith.” They thought of faith and baptism as a unity, not just on theoretical grounds but because in actual practice they came together. It was easy therefore for them to glide unselfconsciously from talking about the one to talking about the other. A few examples will suffice:

In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. (Gal 3:26-27 ESV)

In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11-12 NIV)

Perhaps the most striking example lies in the very structure of Romans. In Romans 1—5 Paul develops his doctrine of justification by faith. In Romans 6 he unselfconsciously turns to a discussion of baptism. Has he completely changed the subject? No. The faith that justifies is the faith that gave birth to baptism at conversion. The baptism by which they were buried with Christ is the baptism with which they expressed their faith at their conversion. A single reality is being discussed from two different angles, as is seen from the blending of faith and confession of Christ (in baptism) in Romans 10:9-10.

New Testament converts' baptism and infant baptism. Do we need to continue? Surely it is abundantly clear that the practice of the apostles as recorded in Acts was believers' baptism, the baptism of those

who had come to faith and repentance, the position taken by Baptists today. So it is commonly understood, but this is not quite true. What we see in Acts is not *believers'* baptism but *converts'* baptism.⁶ People are baptized at the point of their conversion.

Baptism is clearly seen as part of the initial response to the gospel in Acts. Baptism was an essential part of Christian initiation. People were baptized immediately on their conversion, on the very same day, with only one exception. The exception is the Philippian jailer, who was baptized the same night! Baptism was not optional. It was not left to the conscience of the individual believer. It was not delayed until the convert's genuineness was proved. Instead it was part of the gospel message. So in his epistles Paul can assume that his readers have all been baptized (1 Cor 12:13; Eph 4:4-6).

If apostolic baptism was converts' baptism, does that not exclude the baptism of babies? Not necessarily. People were baptized at the point of their conversion. But what happened to their children? What happened to the existing babies and children of those earliest converts? In particular were they baptized with their parents? What happened to the children subsequently born to them? How were they initiated? Were they baptized at birth or at some subsequent stage? Unfortunately neither Luke nor any other New Testament writer gives an unequivocal, explicit answer to this question. Whatever did happen to these children, of one thing we can be certain. They did not receive the converts' baptism described in Acts. Whether they were baptized that day or at the age of five, twelve or eighteen, their baptism was an adaptation of adult converts' baptism to the changed situation of those brought up in a Christian home. The New Testament practice and doctrine of baptism is that of converts' baptism, and *however* the children of those converts were treated would be a modification of that.

Scholars have sometimes suggested that this did not become an issue until the second generation of the church, but that is far from

⁶As is shown by Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, e.g., pp. 393-94.

the truth. The New Testament church was not a student Christian Union of youngsters who had yet to settle down and have families. The three thousand converts on the day of Pentecost must have had many children of every age. Whether or not to baptize was an issue that had to be decided *that day*. How was it decided?

DID THE APOSTOLIC CHURCH BAPTIZE BABIES?

A seismological approach. Traditionally this question has been answered by considering all of the evidence available from New Testament times, which is notoriously ambiguous. I have suggested an alternative “seismological” approach.⁷ Without leaving their own laboratories, seismologists in New York can observe and measure earthquakes that take place in Los Angeles. How do they do this? They can tell what has happened in California by its effects two to three thousand miles away. In a similar manner I would suggest that we can deduce what was the situation in apostolic times by its effects two to three hundred years later.

The beginning of infant baptism. When did infant baptism, the baptism of those too young to speak for themselves, begin? This historical question was argued at some length (but inconclusively) in a famous exchange between two German scholars, Joachim Jeremias, who defended the apostolic origin of infant baptism, and Kurt Aland, who denied it.⁸ The evidence before the end of the second century is so meager and ambiguous that it is widely accepted that a firm verdict is not possible. It may be helpful therefore, in seeking to answer the question, to work backward using our seismological approach: that is, to start from a time in church history where it is clear what happened and to work back from that point to New Testament times.

⁷A. N. S. Lane, “Did the Apostolic Church Baptise Babies? A Seismological Approach,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 55, no. 1 (2004): 109-30. This section is an abbreviation of that article.

⁸Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (London: SCM Press, 1960); Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (London: SCM Press, 1963); Joachim Jeremias, *The Origins of Infant Baptism* (London: SCM Press, 1963). Kurt Aland, *Die Stellung der Kinder in den frühen christlichen Gemeinden—und ihre Taufe* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1967), has not been translated.