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An independent or separate organization is admitted to be consistent with true unity, by all but Romanists, it follows that any given reason not destructive of the principle of unity, may be made the ground of such separate organization; not merely difference as to location, or diversity of language, but diversity of opinion. It is on all hands conceded that there may be difference of opinion, within certain limits, without violating unity of faith; and it is also admitted that there may be independent organization, for considerations of convenience, without violating the unity of communion. It therefore follows, that where such a diversity of opinion exists, as to render such separate organization convenient, the unity of the church is not violated by such separation. Diversity of opinion is indeed an evidence of imperfection, and therefore such separations are evil, so far as they are evidence of want of perfect union in faith. But they are a less evil, than either hypocrisy or contention; and therefore, the diversity of sects, which exists in the Christian world, is to be regarded as incident to imperfect knowledge and imperfect sanctification. They are to be deplored, as every evidence of such imperfection is to be regretted, yet the evil is not to be magnified above its dimensions. So long as unity of faith, of love, and of obedience is persevered, the unity of the church is as to its essential principle safe.

—CHARLES HODGE

## BAPTISM AND THE UNITY OF CHRISTIANS

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*Tom Wells*

Among the differences which divide Christians baptism looms very large. Unlike other doctrines and practices of the church our differences on baptism fall along a number of lines at once. We seem unable to agree on any of the following: (1) Mode of baptism. (2) Proper candidates for baptism. (3) Proper administrators for baptism. (4) Effects of baptism.

Most agree on only two things: baptism requires water, and baptism is appropriate at the outset (in some sense) of the Christian life. Apart from these marginal agreements the word "baptism" is a symbol without meaning—and this after 2000 years of use! Looked at in this way, "baptism" bears all the earmarks of a grand tragedy. No wonder a few groups have ignored it altogether.

Let's look at these differences.

### MODE OF BAPTISM

Three "modes"<sup>1</sup> of baptism have been widely used among Christians: immersion, pouring, and sprinkling. In immersion the candidate is dipped under water. Variations include dipping either forward or backward and immersing the candidate either once in the name of the Trinity or three times, once for each person of the Trinity. These variations are themselves the subject of vigorous debate among some groups of Christians. The reason is not hard to find: symbolism is involved. Each group reasonably contends

that the symbol must agree, as far as possible, with the thing it signifies. The subject is further complicated by the possibility that baptism signifies more than one thing. Immersionists, for example, might contend for two meanings or more, including a thorough "drenching" with the Holy Spirit and the Christian's joint burial and resurrection with Jesus Christ.

Symbolism, of course, also enters into pouring and sprinkling. Those who practice pouring water over the head and body of the candidate often want to show, by a figure, the effect of the outpouring of the Spirit on believers. Others practice trine pouring, symbolizing our coming under the lordship of the Trinity. Those who sprinkle may be most interested in demonstrating the effect of cleansing from sin, using a mode that was prominent in the Old Testament for the washing away of guilt. Those who practice each of these modes point to texts and situations in the New Testament which bolster their views.<sup>2</sup>

#### PROPER CANDIDATES FOR BAPTISM

We are also divided on this question. Baptists hold that only those who can testify to believing in Christ ought to be baptized. Other Christians baptize infants and very young children. This is an enormous difference in itself, and it is further complicated by a lack of agreement among those who baptize infants over the grounds on which this ought to be done. I will come to this in discussing "Effects of Baptism."

#### PROPER ADMINISTRATORS OF BAPTISM

The early church suffered several divisions in which the issue was the proper administrators for baptism.<sup>3</sup> In our century this question is still important among such groups as Landmark Baptists and Churches of Christ. In the case of the Landmarkers the point is that a proper church must

immerse believers. In the Churches of Christ of the "non-additions" group, there is the conviction that other administrators will not require the proper views on baptism from the candidates.

#### EFFECTS OF BAPTISM

Here we reach the most critical point connected with baptism: its actual effect on the candidate who is baptized. What precisely does baptism do? How is a man, woman or infant different before and after baptism, or are they different at all? The variations here are tremendously important.

When the Roman Catholic priest baptizes, he believes that both original and actual sin are forgiven through the merits of Christ. The Reformers varied among themselves, and their heirs continue to differ. Lutherans hold that faith is necessary in the one baptized, but also insist that there is no reason why infants cannot exercise faith. This view, then, seems close to the view of the Roman Catholic Church as far as effects are concerned. The Calvinists have usually emphasized baptism's connection with what is called "covenant theology." In this view a person is assured of his or her interest in "the covenant" when baptized. Baptism in the case of infants, however, is variously explained so that its effects differ as far as forgiveness of sins is concerned. Some of the Reformed hold to forgiveness because of presumed faith in the infants, while others simply make baptism the entrance into the visible congregation of "believers and their seed."

Baptists do not usually think of baptism in terms of effects wrought in the believer. For them it is rather a badge of profession, showing the world that they have submitted to the lordship of Jesus Christ or, at the least, believed in Him as Savior.

#### THE WAY FORWARD

A glance at the differences over baptism show the large

amount of work we must do to eventually arrive at unity. This will be no easy task.

First, we must overcome our lethargy. We must fight the impulse to say, "We are so seriously divided, why bother?" Division among Christians is a product of sin. The sin is not the fact that we cannot agree, but the cause behind it, what theologians call "the noetic effects of sin." Sin has attacked our minds as well as our wills, our emotions and our bodies. In the face of sin we must throw down the gauntlet, not throw in the towel.

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Second, we must seek to overcome our sinful pride. The conviction that we are right and others are wrong is, in itself, inevitable. If we seriously thought that our neighbor was right, our convictions would be his convictions and there would be no division between us. But satisfaction with our own convictions that paralyzes open-hearted discussion is wrong. We must re-examine our "certainties." We

can get nowhere as long as we cannot conceive that we may be wrong.

Third, we must try to break the questions over baptism into more basic questions of biblical interpretation and historical practice. When we survey the opinions that divide us, the *effect of baptism* certainly takes first place. But the key here is an obvious one: the realistic language of Scripture. New Testament texts which describe baptism normally speak of it as effecting some important spiritual change in or for those who are baptized. Through most of church history this language has been taken literally. Is that the correct way to take it? Does baptism bring with it the remission of sins (Acts 2:38)? Did Paul really "wash away" his sins in baptism (Acts 22:16)? Or are these statements of what baptism symbolizes?

Two things need to be said. To start with, we must treat Scripture (in this respect) like any other document; it must be allowed to speak for itself. This suggests that the burden of proof lies on those who find in this language a figurative sense.<sup>4</sup> Such men and women must make their case from the New Testament before they can expect others to listen. But that is not all. Once that case has been carefully laid out, others must listen as sympathetically as possible. Only then can genuine discussion go forward.

Fourth, we must come to a biblical view of the relative amount of weight to be given to the Old Testament and New Testament in our thinking. Here is the great stumbling block to agreement among Baptists and Presbyterians who are evangelicals. Here the burden of proof falls on those who find their baptismal doctrine in the Old Testament rather than the New Testament. And here Baptists must try to listen sympathetically to what their paedobaptist brothers have to say.

Fifth, we must seek to read history honestly, and not simply to bolster our own prejudices. History outside the

Bible cannot determine our doctrine, but it can often show us the understanding of "the Fathers" who handled the Scriptures in the following centuries. We must not follow them slavishly, but their writings exist for our instruction.

#### HAVE WE MADE ANY PROGRESS?

As greatly as we are divided there are, here and there, signs that things are not so bad as they once were. Some of the evidence, slight though it is, follows.

In 1977 InterVarsity Press issued *The Water that Divides*, an irenic look at the baptism debate.<sup>5</sup> Here two participants, apparently co-authoring each chapter and section rather than writing alternately, discuss "Baptism & Scripture," "Baptism & History" and "Baptism Today." In the closing section they suggest ways for baptists and paedobaptists to work together, even in the local church setting. Whether through the influence of this book or not, a relatively few churches are trying to live with diverse views and practices about baptism. An example of such a church is Community Evangelical Fellowship of Moscow, Idaho. Douglas Wilson writes of his church:

We receive both baptistic and paedobaptistic households into membership. We practice both infant baptism and baptism upon profession of faith. We are able to do this because the membership of our church is reckoned by household, and because we all share a strong sense of the covenantal identity of each household, whether baptist or paedobaptist.

As part of this cooperation agreement, we have stated the following in our constitution: "Because of our commitment to the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3), and because of our shared commitment to the practice of household membership . . . these differences have been procedurally resolved between us. We have agreed to work together in this way until such time as the Lord brings us to one mind on the subject of baptism."<sup>6</sup>

Several baptists have written books on baptism that adopt "covenant theology," the justification for paedobaptism used by many presbyterians.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, they have not conceded much else to their opponents. More remarkable were the attacks on paedobaptism by Karl Barth from within a paedobaptist denomination.

From within paedobaptist ranks has come *Baptism in the Early Church*, an earnest endeavor to read the writers of the first four centuries objectively. The book of twenty-six chapters and a bibliography opens with a discussion of the use of church history by modern scholars and continues by discussing the church fathers through Theodore of Mopsuestia (350-428). It closes with a look at early Christian art and the authors' conclusions.<sup>8</sup>

An interesting development, not initially intended to settle differences about baptism, has come in a recent (1998) joint venture between Reformed Baptists and Westminster Seminary in California (Westminster West) which enables baptist students to receive instruction out of their own tradition on matters where baptists and presbyterians differ. Both groups see this as an attempt at expressing Christian unity. The possibilities here for interaction between two differing traditions are promising.

#### CONCLUSIONS

It is easy to ask, "Why don't we all get together?" It is much harder to accomplish. Baptism illustrates the problem, with no simple solutions in sight and few efforts being put forth to eliminate our differences. The large number of variations between us makes reconciling them seem like a daunting task. Before the age of the computer, mathematical problems existed that were so vast that they were left untouched. Baptism seems to present a similar dilemma.

Given the truth of God's providence one might reason as follows:

If baptism were a question of central importance, as many think, surely the Lord would have led us to basic unity about it. This line of thought could be bolstered by noting that the discussion about baptism is a discussion about a ceremony and ceremonies are deeply de-emphasized in the New Testament. That fact is crystal clear when one compares the multitude of rites and ceremonies under the Mosaic economy with the very few commanded for Christians.

Already in the Old Testament, in fact, the prophets felt the large relative difference between ceremonial and moral precepts.

Thus says the Lord, "Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you shall find rest to your souls. But they said, 'We will not walk in it.' . . . But they said, 'We will not listen.' . . . Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, And your sacrifices are not pleasing to me" (Jer. 6:16-20).

What is Yahweh's point here? *Those who ignore morality and godliness must stop their punctilious keeping of His ceremonies.* But notice this: we cannot even imagine Him saying the opposite, "Away with your love for Me and your personal integrity, unless you carefully offer your sacrifices!" Weren't the sacrifices important? Of course, they were, but compared to godliness in the heart they were nothing. God Himself had instituted them, but as important as they were, they were not to be compared with spiritual life.

So then, is baptism relatively unimportant? As attractive as this option is, many strongly deny it. They remind us that there is more than a hint of a relation between circumcision and baptism in the New Testament. (The extent of that relation is one of the things strongly contested, but few deny it outright.) And they insist that whatever was true of

burnt offerings and sacrifices under the Old Testament, those who refused circumcision were cut off from God's ancient people (Gen. 17:10-14). The same, they tell us, goes for baptism today.

So the differences remain. Is it too much to suggest that those who feel most strongly about these differences are most obliged to seek their resolution? Surely the Lord would be pleased to see us pray for heartfelt reconciliation. Who knows but what He will have mercy on us and bless us?

Perhaps some day a writer of historical theology will write *A History of the Dialogue on Baptism*. Let us hope and pray that the day he sets pen to paper will not be too far away.

#### Author

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#### Notes

1. I have placed "modes" in quotation marks because of the widespread view, often insisted upon by Baptists and supported by others, that the word "baptism" itself describes mode by literally meaning "dipping" or "immersion." In this view the phrase "mode of baptism" means "mode of immersion" and, hence, is redundant.
2. Immersionists, in addition to holding that "baptism" and "immersion" are synonyms, cite texts like Acts 8:38-39 and Romans 6:4-5. Those who pour cite Acts 1:5 with 2:33 and 10:44-45. Those who sprinkle emphasize texts in which cleansing is prominent, e.g., Acts 22:16 and Titus 3:5 as well as the situation at Pentecost in which they see the unlikelihood of so many being immersed in a short time.
3. See standard reference works under *Novatians* and *Donatists*.
4. This, of course, is an oversimplification in the interests of not discussing

biblical interpretation in a short article. "Figurative sense" is the obvious sense in many contexts and, hence, requires no "burden of proof."

5. Donald Bridge and David Phypers, *The Water that Divides* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity, 1977). Reprinted by Christian Focus Publications, 1998.
6. Douglas Wilson, *To a Thousand Generations* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1996), 5. The book shows beyond doubt that Wilson himself is a dedicated paedobaptist, but in his congregation he has sought to accommodate the feelings and convictions of others.
7. E.g., P. K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1978).
8. H. F. Stander & J. P. Louw, *Baptism in the Early Church* (Garsfontein, South Africa: Didaskalia, 1988). At the time of publication, the authors were professors in the University of Pretoria, South Africa.