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Baptism and The Moral Life

Everett Ferguson

Karl Barth, the great twentieth-century Reformed theologian, found the Biblical and theological grounds for infant baptism wanting. Although he opposed any rebaptism (on the grounds of the objective working of God in spite of any irregularities), he had these significant things to say:

Baptism without the willingness and readiness of the baptized is true, effectual and effective baptism, but it is not correct; it is not done in obedience, it is not administered according to proper order, and therefore it is necessarily clouded baptism. . . .

Neither by exegesis nor from the nature of the case can it be established that the baptized person can be a merely passive instrument (*Behandelter*). Rather it may be shown, by exegesis and from the nature of the case, that in this action the baptized is an active partner (*Handelnder*) and that at whatever stage of life he may be, plainly no *infans* can be such a person. . . .

In the sphere of the New Testament one is not brought to baptism; one comes to baptism. . . .

[O]ne can hardly come to any other conclusion but that the case for a New Testament proof of infant-baptism is more than weak.

From the standpoint of a doctrine of baptism, infant-baptism can hardly be preserved without exegetical and practical artifices and sophisms—the proof to the contrary has yet to be supplied. One wants to preserve it only if one is resolved to do so on grounds

which lie outside the biblical passages on baptism and outside the thing itself. . . .

Then Barth comes to the core of the problem in Europe:

If she were to break with infant-baptism, the Church would not easily any longer be a people's church in the sense of a state Church or a church of the masses.¹

Barth had seen the effects infant baptism had on the State churches in Europe, one effect being a non-committed membership.

Infant baptism does not have to have this effect. Some groups have kept a committed membership with infant baptism, and many individuals baptized as infants have grown into faithful Christians. On the other hand, churches which practice believers baptism have not always been successful in maintaining a committed membership.

The Anabaptists of the Reformation and their successors saw the connection between believers baptism and discipleship. This connection was contradicted by a church in which everyone in a society was a member. Franklin Littell described their views this way:

The promiscuous use of the rite [of baptism] to bring into the Great Church all kinds of pagans without inner reformation indicated the "Fall." When this happened the moral life of the community blended with that of the world. . . . The corruption of the church was precisely this: that she took in masses of people who had no understanding of what the Gospel meant . . . and then completed the compromise in later centuries by taking in generation after generation of children who had not reached the age of

¹ Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, trans. Ernest A. Payne (London: SCM Press, 1948), 40, 41, 42, 45, 49, 52–53. More recently, historians and theologians in the Reformed tradition have found the historical basis for infant baptism deficient. Examples of this research include the late David F. Wright (Church of Scotland), *What Has Infant Baptism Done to Baptism? An Enquiry at the End of Christendom* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005); *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collected Studies* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2007); and H. F. Stander and J. P. Louw (Dutch Reformed) *Baptism in the Early Church* (Pretoria: Didaskalia, 1988).

understanding. “For a Christian life is no child’s play,” but a matter calling for stern discipline and vigorous ethical living.²

As these reformers clearly saw, the New Testament presents a close relationship between baptism and the Christian life.

N. T. Wright’s recent book on Christian ethics, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters*, contrasts the New Testament approach to ethics with the views that ethics are a matter of obeying the rules or a matter of being true to the deepest longings of one’s heart (or “doing what comes naturally”). The approach of Jesus and the early Christians involved a transformation of character.³ Wright says little about the connection of baptism with this transformation.⁴ However, the New Testament, especially the Pauline letters, presents an intimate connection.

Believers Baptism in Paul’s Epistles

I offer here a study of the meaning of believers baptism for the life of the church by examining Paul’s rich theology of baptism.⁵ First of all, it is important to remember that references to baptism are in letters addressed to those already baptized. Paul appeals to the meaning of baptism as a shared basis for drawing conclusions about Christian conduct and the life of the church.

Romans 6:1–12

Romans 6 is the showcase example of the connection Paul makes between baptism and the Christian moral life.

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sins in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to

² Franklin Hamlin Littell, *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 70.

³ N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), *passim*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 280–282.

⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 146–165.

sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again: death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sins, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey your passions.

In the preceding chapters of Romans Paul has charged all, both Jews and Gentiles, as being under sin (Rom 3:23). The answer to sin was not the law, for it could only reveal sin (Rom 3:20), but could not give the power to keep its requirements. God's answer to the human dilemma was putting forward Christ as a sacrifice of atonement (Rom 3:25). Both Jews and Gentiles are justified by faith (Rom 3:28–30), as exemplified by Abraham (Rom 4). God's grace thus triumphed over sin and the law (Rom 5:15–19). As sin increased, grace super-abounded (Rom 5:20,21).

This gospel of grace naturally led to the question, real or hypothetical, "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" (Rom 6:1). Paul's immediate response is "Perish the thought!" (Rom 6:2). His reasoned answer to the objection is that the meaning of baptism refutes the idea that grace means one can sin so grace can abound.

The answer is bound up with the centrality of Christology for Paul. At the heart of his Christology was the death and resurrection of Christ. It is the death and resurrection of Christ that give meaning to baptism. Baptism into

Christ is a baptism into his death. Baptism brings one into Christ's death, which effects atonement. The baptized person, therefore, has died to sin. The old self has been crucified. If one has died to sin, that person cannot go on living in sin. Paul does not address the problem that the baptized person may fall again into sin, because he or she has not actually died. So Paul says, "You must consider yourself dead to sin" (Rom 6:11).

For Paul, the resurrection of Christ is of equal, or greater, importance with his death. Hence, the one baptized into him is united also with his resurrection life. That means the baptized person is raised to walk in newness of life and is alive to God in Christ Jesus (Rom 6:4, 11). This new life anticipates the future resurrection (Rom 6:5, 8). The qualities of this new life are described in chapters 8 (one is now under the Spirit, not under sin nor under law) and 12–15 (life as a living sacrifice).

Implicit in the text is that the baptized person is of responsible age. This person can die to sin. Newness of life begins with baptism and not sometime later in one's life. Baptism, because of its connection with the death and resurrection of Christ, sets the character of one's conduct—rejecting sin and living a life in Christ.

Colossians 2:11–15

Colossians 2 makes explicit the connection of faith with baptism that is implicit in Rom 6.⁶

In him [Christ] also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision [made without hands], by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ: when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross. He dis-

⁶ In Rom 10:8–11 Paul does connect the (baptismal) faith in the heart and confession with the lips with the death and resurrection of Jesus.

armed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

There is a question whether “the circumcision of Christ” refers to his death, a stripping away of his flesh, in which one participates at baptism, or is something done by Christ to the one baptized. I incline to the former view, but either way Paul employs circumcision language in connection with baptism. That has led to the view that baptism is the Christian equivalent of circumcision in the Old Testament. But that interpretation would be incorrect. The circumcision in this passage is done “without hands.” It stands in contrast to physical circumcision, and is also inapplicable to baptism. Rather than being parallel to baptism, circumcision is something done in baptism.

In baptism one identifies with the death of Christ. Also, more explicitly than Rom 6, baptism is a resurrection with Christ. The act of baptism is an expression of faith in the power of God, specifically in his power in raising Christ from the dead.

This significance of baptism, namely faith in the resurrection of Christ, is possible and meaningful only to one of responsible age. That person was previously dead in trespasses but is now made alive with Christ, because the trespasses are forgiven and the record of their debt was cancelled, being nailed to the cross (Col 2:13,14). Because of what God has done, the person can now live victoriously (Col 2:15).

The passage functions in Colossians as a corrective to erroneous views that denigrated Christ in comparison with other heavenly powers, or supplemented faith in him with such powers. The context emphasizes the superiority of Christ (Col 2:9,10). The all sufficiency of what God has done through him makes unnecessary the rituals promoted by the errorists (Col 2:16–23). What is especially relevant for this essay is the way the baptismal language of Col 2:12, of being buried with Christ and raised with him, is picked up in the subsequent moral instruction. “If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belonged to the world?” (Col 2:20). “If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are

above, where Christ is” (Col 3:1). “Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly” (Col 3:5). The significance of baptism determines the attitudes and conduct of the baptized.

1 Corinthians 6:9–11

Some in Corinth had been guilty of serious social sins.

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be (1 Cor 6:9–11a).

However, they had been changed:

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor 6:11b).

This passage highlights the dramatic moral change which should occur after becoming a Christian. The main features of early Christian understanding of baptism are here: a cleansing, invoking the name of Christ (in whose name the baptism was done and perhaps specifically referring to the faith confessed at baptism—cf. Acts 22:16), and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Being “washed, sanctified, and justified” meant certain conduct was now ruled out. The Holy Spirit given in baptism made the body a temple (1 Cor 6:19), not to be used for sexual immorality (1 Cor 6:13–18). One is no longer one’s own, for the Lord bought the person with a price (1 Cor 6:20). Baptism made its recipients members of Christ (1 Cor 6:15), which reminds us of Rom 6:3 and prepares for 1 Cor 12.

1 Corinthians 12:12,13

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in [by] the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Baptism incorporates one into the church, “the body of Christ.” Baptism is, therefore, central to the unity of the church (cf. Eph 4:4–6). Diversity of race and economic status is overcome in this new social reality. Oneness in Christ is consistent with diversity of members, as in a human physical body (1 Cor 12:14, 27). The one divine Spirit introduces the baptized into the one body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13a). The last phrase may be translated either “be given to drink” or “be watered or irrigated” (1 Cor 12:13b). Either metaphor would refer to reception of the Holy Spirit and his refreshing presence in the life of the baptized in addition to his action in incorporating one into Christ. Baptism becomes significant for how Christians regard one another in the united body of Christ (1 Cor 12:14–26).

Galatians 3:26–29

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise (Gal 3:26–29).

This passage introduces another metaphor. Not only is one baptized into Christ and thus becomes a member of Christ, but that person is also clothed with Christ (Gal 3:27). The oneness is extended from race and economic status to include the sexual distinction of male and female. All have equal access to the covenant of Abraham (Gal 3:29). Indeed that is the point of the passage. The church does not live under the Mosaic law (Gal 3:10–25); it is no longer subject to its tutelage but now lives as sons of God (Gal 3:23–26). Through faith those who are baptized into Christ are incorporated into him and so share his sonship (Gal 3:26,27). Having become sons, they receive the Spirit (Gal 4:6).

This passage is important because it shows the association of faith and baptism: faith as the basis of sonship and baptism as the occasion of becoming God’s children (Gal 3:26,27). In the larger context of Galatians baptism

marks a change of status so that one does not live as a slave to the Law but as a freeborn child he or she lives by the Spirit of sonship (Gal 5).

Ephesians 5:25–27

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, in order to make her holy by cleansing her with the washing of water by [with] the word, so as to present the church to himself in splendor, without a spot or wrinkle or anything of the kind—yes, so that she may be holy and without blemish.

Paul uses the relationship of Christ and the church as the standard for the relationship of husbands and wives. He refers to the custom of a wedding bath before the exchange of vows. On that analogy, the bath or washing⁷ is baptism and “the word” would likely be the accompanying confession of faith by which one pledged fidelity to Christ. The purpose of the cleansing by water and the word is to produce a holy, unblemished church. As is the husband’s desire for his wife, so is Christ’s desire for his church. Baptism is once more linked to a high standard of moral purity—without stain or blemish, holy and blameless.

Titus 3:3–7

Titus also uses the word for bath or washing in reference to baptism.

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water [washing] of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Again, we find a contrast of the past and present but with a different kind of vice list from that in 1 Cor 6. This list has more to do with characteristics

⁷ A word often used in early Christian literature for baptism.

and attitudes than with specific activities. And again, the passage has to do with those old enough to have experienced sin.

The word for regeneration (*palingenesia*) is different from the word for rebirth (*anagennēsis*), which in the verb form occurs in 1 Pet 1:3, 23 (cf. John 3:3), and was used in reference to a new world or new age (Matt 19:28). Baptism is the cleansing from the old manner of life, a cleansing that is related to the end-time and effected by the Holy Spirit's renewal. This washing has a present purpose, for believers in God are to dedicate themselves to good works (Titus 3:8).

Summary

Baptism according to Paul is closely related to the moral life. Believers baptism has a central significance for the life of the church.

The church is those who live a new life as slaves of righteousness (Rom 6), who live victorious over sin (Col 2:11–15), who constitute a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:9–20), who are a unity in the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12–27), who are heirs of the covenant of Abraham and live by his faith (Gal 3:23–29), who are a holy and glorious people (Eph 5:26–28), and who practice good deeds (Titus 3:3–8). Such is the significance of believers baptism for the moral life of the church.

We would do well to emphasize the moral dimension of baptism along with its true doctrinal meaning in our evangelistic preaching, in our teaching to converts before and after baptism, and in our instruction to the church. Such would perhaps alleviate some of the push to de-emphasize the saving significance of baptism and diminish the number of those who, after their baptism, drift away from the church.

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