

CHRISTIAN STUDIES

SCHOLARSHIP FOR THE CHURCH

A PUBLICATION OF THE FACULTY OF AUSTIN GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

Volume 31 / 2019

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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 Keith D. Stanglin, Austin Graduate School of Theology, 7640 Guadalupe Street, Austin, Texas 78752. *Christian Studies* is indexed in ATLA Religion Database. Copyright Institute for Christian Studies. Web Site: www.austingrad.edu.

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Volume 31

2019

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This past February (2019), the General Conference of the United Methodist Church met in St. Louis. The primary item on the agenda was the existing language in “The Book of Discipline” regarding sexual ethics. After much debate and controversy, over 800 delegates cast their votes. Fifty-three percent favored retaining the language, and forty-seven percent voted against it, revealing how evenly divided the denomination is on this issue. At the time of this writing, it is unclear how the dissenters will proceed, but it is unlikely that the issue will go away or that unity will be the long-term result.

As many have observed, the identity crisis that the United Methodist Church and many other Christian fellowships seem to be facing is due, in large part, to a crisis of authority. Is Scripture the primary authority, and how is it brought to bear on the controversial issues of our day? This question is fundamental to the life and faith of the church and is pertinent to a wide range of topics. Because of the relevance of this question, this issue of *Christian Studies* is devoted to the theme of authority for Christian faith and practice. And this question is of utmost importance. Where does our authority for faith and practice lie? What are the proper sources for theology? What are the standards for evaluating different theologies? What should they be? What role does the greater historic tradition of the church play?

The contributors to this issue have emphasized different aspects of these questions, and various solutions are proposed in the following pages. In addition to biblical insights, these articles offer a range of theological, historical, and philosophical considerations regarding the authority and interpretation of Scripture. As always, our intent is to provide thoughtful reflection that will create dialogue about matters that are important to God’s people.

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Reading Scripture Baptismally

Scott Adair

I. Introduction

The Churches of Christ occupy a rare space between two Christian worlds concerning baptism. Along with Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, and some mainline Protestants we believe that baptism is necessary for salvation. As the Nicene Creed (381) puts it, we, too “acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” On the other hand, with Evangelicals we insist that baptism is only for believers. We have a high view of baptism similar to the former and a high view of faith similar to the latter. But we reject the former’s low view of faith at the time of baptism, and the latter’s low view of baptism at the time of faith. As such, our precise baptismal theology is, in some ways, a bridge, and, in some ways, a wall. Of course, our baptismal theology is not the result of picking and choosing what we like from different traditions; it comes from our approach to Scripture: our patternistic restoration hermeneutic.¹ While “doing and saying what the New Testament church did and said” has fine-tuned our convictions about baptism, this way of reading Scripture has its blind spots. Based on the polarity and divisiveness we see in our movement, apparently our hermeneutic has not been effective in helping us navigate controversies. For even though Scripture itself elevates certain teachings as more important than others,² our patternism has not always enabled us to clearly distinguish between essential doctrines and matters of expedience. This

¹ Keith Stanglin, “The Restoration Movement, the Habit of Schism, and a Proposal for Unity,” *Christian Studies* 28 (2016): 10.

² Some of these distillations of essential truths in Scripture are doctrinal in nature: the seven ones (Eph 4:4–7), and what Paul received and passed on “as of first importance” (1 Cor 15:3). Some are ethical: the golden rule (Matt 7:12), and the commandment of love (Rom 13:9–10). Some are both: the *Shema* (Deut 6:4, Mark 12:29).

deficiency shows up in two ways: 1) demanding adherence to peripheral teachings as if they were central, or 2) allowing too much leeway when it comes to core teachings.³ Until we address this problem in our approach to Scripture, we will continue to isolate ourselves and split churches.

What the Churches of Christ need is an agreed upon theological center, a lens through which to read Scripture. We need an authoritative summary that lays out for us the core teachings of the apostles. The answer may be nearer to us than we think. There is an overlooked summary of the Christian faith inherent in baptism. This article calls for Restorationists to read Scripture baptismally, not just baptize scripturally. While we have a thoroughgoing theology *about* baptism, we have overlooked the theology *in* baptism. This initiating rite, after all, is not arbitrary. It is not simply a hoop to jump through or a meaningless test of obedience. Rather, it is freighted with essential truths about the divine story one is entering. We understand this principle when it comes to the Lord's Supper. We recognize that the bread and the wine communicate central truths about Christ. But we have not been as astute with baptism. When we limit our baptismal theology to precise instructions about a final step unto salvation, we fail to see that this ancient, participatory rite is a distillation of the whole Christian system. With just the slightest adjustment of perspective one can see that all of the central tenets of the Christian faith are compressed, stored, expressed, and enjoined upon the church in this (un)systematic theology called baptism.⁴ The enduring ordinance, understood in this way, is more than just a "salvation issue." In ritual form, it makes claims about God (theology), Christ (Christology), the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), the church (ecclesiology), humanity (anthropology), sin (hamartiology), and hope (eschatology)—as well as salvation (soteriology). I will support this claim by decompressing the ritual—unpacking its doctrinal contents—noting, along the way, how this material compares with that of other summaries recognized in the broader Christian tradition.

³ Just last year, a prominent scholar in our movement said to the Bible faculty at Harding University that adhering to the doctrine of the Trinity is not essential and should be understood as a matter of opinion or a disputable matter such as those addressed by Paul in Romans 14.

⁴ "Unsystematic" because it is not linear, not systematized. Yet "systematic" because it stores information about each of the main categories that traditional systematic theology covers.

II. Baptism as Summary

Baptism—that is, the entire event of baptism and the words that accompany it—provides a comprehensive encapsulation of the Christian faith. It instructs the church and binds upon it the core content of the apostolic message through its invocation, confessions, and symbolic actions. More so, this content is consistent with that found in later summaries, such as the rule of faith and the Apostles' Creed. And while baptism expresses both doctrinal and ethical truths, this article focuses primarily on its doctrinal content.

Invoking the Triune Name. First, baptism done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit initiates one into a faith that is distinctly and unapologetically Trinitarian. This trifold invocation of God's name lays out the basic outline of the Christian system. Whether sprinkling, pouring, or immersing, invoking the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit has been a ubiquitous feature of the practice throughout Christian history and across denominational lines. Some might point out that the very earliest baptisms did not adhere to this triune formula. For example, Acts of the Apostles reports that converts were baptized “in the name of Jesus Christ.” Granted, but this is not at odds with the triune invocation. In fact, it is consistent with it. After all, the inner logic of the name, “Jesus Christ,” retains within it the Trinitarian contours of the apostolic message because the honorific, “Christ,” or “the Anointed One,” points to the “beginning of the gospel” (Mark 1:1), when the Father anointed the Son with the Holy Spirit in the Jordan (Mark 1:9–11). This scene, this opening act at the Jordan River, links baptism and Trinity.⁵

This triune invocation is the most natural explanation for the origin of the three-limbed formulation of the Roman Symbol, a baptismal confession in the West that found its final form in the Apostles' Creed.⁶ When comparing the

⁵ Killian McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1996), demonstrates that the baptism of Jesus was the dominant baptismal metaphor for the first three centuries of the church, as witnessed in patristic reflection as well as early Christian art.

⁶ Explaining the provenance of the Apostles' Creed, or more challenging, the rule of faith, is not as simple as I have stated here. Determining exactly how the *kerygma*, early creeds, hymns, liturgical confessions, baptismal formula, the Roman Symbol, pre-baptismal catechism, the rule of faith, the councils, and the Apostles' Creed relate to each other, regarding origins, is likely not possible. Nevertheless, this has not stopped some from trying, see Tomas Bokedal, “The Rule of Faith: Tracing its

baptism described in the *Didache* (80–120) to the practice in the Apostolic Tradition (200–215), one can see the movement from triune invocation to a three-part interrogatory creed, the latter of which is almost identical in content to the declaratory Apostles' Creed. Echoing the Great Commission, the *Didache* instructs, "Concerning baptism, baptize in this way. Having first rehearsed all these things, baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, in living water."⁷ The following excerpt from the Apostolic Tradition shows how the succinct invocation expanded to form the outline of the baptismal creed.

When each of them to be baptized has gone down into the water, the one baptizing shall lay hands on each of them, asking,

"Do you believe in God, the Father Almighty?"

And the one being baptized shall answer, "I believe."

He shall then baptize each of them once, laying his hand upon each of their heads.

Then he shall ask, "Do you believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, died, and rose on the third day living from the dead, and ascended into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of the Father, the one coming to judge the quick and the dead?"

When each has answered, "I believe," he shall baptize a second time.

Then he shall ask, "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit, and the holy church, and the resurrection of the flesh?"

Then each being baptized shall answer, "I believe."

And thus let him baptize the third time.⁸

Origins," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 7 (2013): 233–55. See also, Everett Ferguson, *The Rule of Faith: A Guide* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015), 48–65.

⁷ *Didache* 7, in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 64.

⁸ *The Treatise on the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus of Rome, Bishop and Martyr*, ed. Gregory Dix (London: Alban Press, 1992), 36.

The trifold invocation is also consistent with the heresy-fighting efforts of the Church fathers. When distortions of the apostolic message threatened the young Christian movement from within, bishops and theologians based their polemic on the three-pronged rule of faith, the sum content of the Christian gospel.⁹ The standard, therefore, by which new teachings were measured, was always Trinitarian.

As such, baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a primary basis for Christian unity, not simply because of the shared words and forms, but because these point to the non-negotiable Trinitarian faith that is unmistakably and unashamedly Christian. Trinitarian baptism as the foundation for unity is not foreign to the New Testament. When Paul pleads for unity in Ephesians 4:4–7, the divine persons and baptism comprise four of the seven “ones.”¹⁰

In keeping with the historic church, Restorationists, too, have typically been careful to invoke “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” at baptism, though seemingly unaware that the divine name provides the threefold outline for the core content of the gospel. Restorationists, who have been so intent on baptizing scripturally, have too often failed to read Scripture baptismally. I am convinced that had Barton Stone and his heirs read Scripture through the filter of “Father, Son, and Spirit,” they would have seen the interrelatedness of God as the stage on which the drama of Scripture unfolds. As such, they would have been spared from their Arian leanings.¹¹

⁹ Ferguson, *Rule of Faith*, 1–15, essentially provides a rule of faith reader with examples from the works of Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, and others. While it may be difficult to establish, with certainty, first-century baptismal invocation (e.g. Matt 28:19) as the root of the rule of faith, it is uncontroversial to say that it is consistent with the rule of faith.

¹⁰ Baptism relates directly to the remaining three “ones” of Ephesians 4:4–7, as well: “one body,” “one hope,” “one faith.”

¹¹ For a discussion of Barton Stone’s Christology, namely his rejection of the Son’s eternal existence and co-equality with God, the Father, see Robert D. Cornwall, “Christology,” in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, ed. Paul M. Blowers, Anthony L. Dunnivant, Douglas A. Foster, D. Newell Williams (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 204. In the same volume, Newell Williams, “Barton Warren Stone,” notes that Stone denied the “Arian” and “Socinian” labels that others gave him, and made efforts to distinguish his views from such heresies (701, 710–12).

Confessing Jesus as Lord. Second, baptism encapsulates the core content of the Christian faith through its confessions or creeds. It is the common, if not universal, practice that a Christological confession is made at the time of baptism.¹² This is certainly true in the Churches of Christ, which points to the fact that Restorationists, technically speaking, are not anti-creedal.¹³ In fact, the Churches of Christ require a creed, and it is at the time of baptism: “I believe Jesus is the Son of God.”¹⁴ Christological creeds, such as this one, undoubtedly go back to the very earliest Christian experience.¹⁵ More strongly, without Christological creeds, there is no such thing as “Christian experience.”

The New Testament reflects more than just one creedal formula spoken at the time of baptism.¹⁶ That is, there was flexibility regarding the exact wording of the confessions. While there was no variation regarding Jesus as the primary subject, those first believers had multiple ways to verbally express their allegiance to him at baptism. The most prevalent were, “Jesus is the Messiah,” “Jesus is Lord,” and “Jesus is the Son of God.” Each wording had a special emphasis, to be sure, but all of the phrases pointed to the same reality. To say, “Jesus is the Messiah,” given the Jewish origins of the faith, is to say, “Jesus is

¹² Baptism and creeds were united very early in church history. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 379: “Because the proclamation of the kerygma and the administration of baptism belonged together, creeds were made necessary also by the demand of Christian baptism ‘in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit’ or ‘in the name of Christ.’”

¹³ The Restoration framers were only opposed to human-made creeds. See William B. Decker, “Baptismal Confession,” *Restoration Quarterly* 1 (1957): 184.

¹⁴ This is typically expressed by affirming an interrogatory creed: “Do you believe Jesus is the Son of God?”

¹⁵ Bokedal, “Rule of Faith,” 242, regarding the confession, “Jesus is the Son of God,” from Acts 8:37, he says, “This Western reading may, in fact, be our earliest extant baptismal profession of faith, indicating that the Christ-confession was associated with baptism from the beginning.”

¹⁶ Abraham Malherbe, “New Testament Creeds and their Uses,” *Christian Studies* 14 (1994): 10, asserts that Rom 10:9—“if you believe in heart and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord you will be saved”—is a baptismal text. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1972), 14–19, points to several early single-clause Christological creeds, such as Acts 8:16; 19:5; 1 Cor 6:11; Rom 10:9; Phil 2:11.

the Son of God.”¹⁷ Such a confession was provocative and costly, given the political ramifications. For when people confess Jesus as King, or divine Son, or Lord, they are saying Caesar is not.¹⁸ The Apostles’ Creed, though, rather than choosing one Christological title over another, locks-in all three of the honorifics: “[I believe] in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord.”

All of this is simply to say that Christian baptism, like the rule of faith and the Apostles’ Creed, is Christocentric. In other words, Jesus Christ is the clear focal point of the content of each. For example, of the twelve articles in the Apostles’ Creed, six of them are about Jesus (one article for the Father, and one article for the Spirit). This is consistent with the rule of faith as well. Whether it is the version of the rule found in Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Clement, or anywhere else, there is always more doctrinal material dedicated to Jesus Christ than there is to any other category. The story unfolds along Trinitarian lines, but the story, itself, focuses on the person of Christ. So, it is the case with Christian baptism, including the one that Restorationists practice. The spoken words associated with the rite are unmistakably Christocentric. Sadly, however, Christ-centeredness has not always described how Restorationists approach Scripture.¹⁹

In review up to this point, when the Churches of Christ baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, confessing Jesus Christ as the Son of God (and/or Lord), they are verbalizing the very foundation of the Christian faith,

¹⁷ Ps 2:7, 2 Sam 12:7, as well as Mark 1:9–11 show the connection between the Jewish understanding of Messiah and Son of God. In these passages the Anointed One is also the Son of God.

¹⁸ Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 16, captures the costly nature of Christian baptism and its attendant creeds: “When admitting to participation in the Eucharist by baptism, God and the church needed to ask whether a candidate had grasped what he or she was taking on. And so, as the candidate took the morally revolutionary and quite possibly fatal step, the candidate would be asked, ‘Do you believe . . .?’”

¹⁹ For example, T. W. Brents, *The Gospel Plan of Salvation* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1874). This ambitious and influential volume ostensibly gave Restorationists a complete exposition of the gospel. The first one hundred and fifty pages exposed the errors of Calvinist doctrines. The final three hundred focused on the proper mode and function of baptism; refuting pedobaptists, non-immersionists, and anyone that does not view baptism as essential for salvation. Doug Foster notes that the *Gospel Plan of Salvation*, in spite of its title, has nothing in it that can properly be labeled Christological, in “Christology in the Stone-Campbell Movement: An Exploratory Survey” (paper presented at *Restoration Theological Fellowship*, Boston, November 20, 1999), 10.

one that enjoys overlap with the essential content of the rule of faith and the Apostles' Creed. All three of these historic summaries present a doctrinal core that is Trinitarian and Christocentric. Flowing out of this Trinitarian, Christocentric story are several remaining essential elements that baptism expresses.

The Depths of the Symbol. Third, the symbolic act of immersion in water enjoins upon the convert and proclaims to the church, even if non-discursively, the remaining basic tenets of the Christian faith. In addition to theology and Christology, the ritual, as it is described in the New Testament, expresses other core teachings concerning the Spirit, humanity, sin, salvation, the church, and our future hope. This article will continue to compare the content of baptism with that of the Apostles' Creed, which also includes central tenets beyond the Trinity and Christ. The rule of faith, though, has too many variations on these matters for a treatment of this length to make any meaningful comparisons.

While some baptizers are careful to mention the promise from Acts 2:38 concerning the gift of the Holy Spirit, the sending and sealing of the Spirit is expressed in the ritual whether verbalized or not. After all, Christian baptism finds its primary narrative antecedent in Jesus' baptism in the Jordan.²⁰ As such, Christian baptism recalls and re-enacts the Trinitarian drama where the Father anoints his Son with his Spirit (Matt 3:16–17; Mark 4:9–11; Luke 3:21–22). Just as the Father sent his Spirit to confirm Jesus' divine Sonship, so also the Father sends us his Spirit as we unite with his Son, confirming our adoption as sons or daughters. This pneumatologically rich symbol invites the church to develop from Scripture a robust doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Not unlike baptism, the connection between water and the Spirit of God is a theme in the biblical story from beginning (Gen 1:2) to end (Rev 22:17).²¹ To read Scripture baptismally is to recognize that this water/Spirit motif offers insights about the work of the Holy Spirit within the created order, not simply an apologetic for the necessity of baptism.

Admittedly, whether in word or in symbol, the explicit pneumatological content in baptism is brief. But that is how rituals function. They compress

²⁰ J. A. T. Robinson, "The One Baptism as a Category of New Testament Soteriology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 6 (1953): 257–74, makes the case that Paul draws on the baptism of Jesus to inform Christian baptism. Consider, for example, how Paul connects "baptism," with "sonship" and "Spirit" in Galatians 3:26–4:7.

²¹ Other examples include John 3:5 and 1 John 5:7–8.

inexhaustible concepts into a memorable symbolic action that invites further exploration. The Apostles' Creed is similarly concise: "I believe in the Holy Spirit."²²

In a passage of Scripture almost as familiar to Restorationists as Acts 2:38, Romans 6 connects immersion in water with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. As such, being lowered and lifted from the water recalls the pivotal event of human history, the crux of the apostolic message (1 Cor 15:3–7). The rite not only looks back, it looks forward, claiming Jesus' triumph over death as the destiny for believers as well as the bellwether for the cosmos (Rom 8:18–23). The ritual is dramatized eschatology. The Apostles' Creed, likewise, includes eschatological articles of faith: "[I believe] in the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting."

Beyond just doctrinal content, this death and rising imagery also has an ethical element. Though it is beyond the scope of this article to develop this ethical dimension in detail, it should not be overlooked that this symbolic death connotes that the convert is no longer living for herself (Rom 6, Gal 2:20). In other words, baptism symbolizes and enjoins upon the person the mandate of obedient self-outpouring, modeled perfectly in the incarnation and cross of Christ (Phil 2:6–11). The Apostles' Creed, on the other hand, does not contain this participatory, ethical component. As such, it is deficient as a stand-alone distillation of the faith. To be fair, however, the Apostles' Creed emerged not in isolation but in connection with baptism.

The New Testament also connects baptism with washing. In simplest terms, baptism is a bath (1 Pet 3:21). This washing symbolism, as well as the phrase, "for the forgiveness of sins," that Restorationists zero-in on, says something about the nature of sin, human culpability and the need to be reconciled (Acts 2:38; 22:16). Baptism, and the gospel that it summarizes and enacts, engages the categories of hamartiology, anthropology, and soteriology. The Apostles' Creed follows suit: "[I believe in] the forgiveness of sin." While it

²² Concerning the need to flesh out the creed or summary of faith with Scripture, see Jenson, *Canon and Creed*, 41: "One cannot keep saying 'Jesus died to save us from our sin' without pondering how that might work [. . .] thus sophisticated theological reflection a la Paul or John. [. . .] One cannot keep confessing 'he is Lord' without identifying the subject. Thus to remain Gospel, the gospel narrative requires narrative expansion, a la the Gospels."

might be easy to take such a pithy phrase for granted, any statement claiming to summarize the Christian faith that gives no accounting for human sinfulness and its remedy is simply not Christian.

Also, it should not go unnoticed that the ritual is passive. Restorationists have traditionally understood baptism as one of “the five steps” in “the plan of salvation.”²³ However, given the passive nature of the command, “be baptized,” perhaps “step” is not the most fitting metaphor. The convert is not so much the doer or the actor, but the one giving consent to be acted upon. This is not just a matter of semantics. It is germane to the content of the Christian message that one never baptizes oneself. Someone else, one belonging to the church, gives the convert a bath. A private baptism, then, or a baptism without any witnesses, is not actually possible. For there will at least be one other, or it is not Christian baptism. This universal feature of baptism communicates meaning regarding the role that the church plays in mediating divine grace. To say it plainly, one cannot bypass the church to receive the benefits of Christ. The New Testament’s baptismal ecclesiology is explicit, presenting it as a symbol of catholicity: “for we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free” (1 Cor 12:13). The Apostles’ Creed also makes ecclesiological confessions: “[I believe in] the holy catholic church, the communion of saints.”

III. Conclusion

In sum, this cursory analysis demonstrates that baptism, both in word and symbol, makes claims about theology, Christology, pneumatology, eschatology, anthropology, hamartiology, ecclesiology, and soteriology. It stores, expresses, and enjoins upon the church the core content of the apostolic message. The letters of the New Testament were written to baptized communities. Based on the number of baptismal allusions in them, it seems that the authors

²³ This five-step approach among Restorationists is traced back to Walter Scott (1796–1861), who used his five-finger exercise as a memory aid in teaching. See Peter Morgan, “Five Finger Exercise,” in *Encyclopedia of the Stone-Campbell Movement*, 338–39. Scott pointed to each finger, starting with the thumb, and repeated the words, “faith,” “repentance,” “baptism,” “remission of sins,” “gift of the Holy Spirit,” sometimes pairing “eternal life” with the Holy Spirit on the little finger. It also served as a contrasting response to *ordo salutis* in Reformed soteriology. Soon after Scott, however, the following revised five-step plan emerged: hear, believe, repent, confess, and be baptized.

assumed that the audience could not read or hear these letters except baptismally. This may explain why New Testament documents do not typically argue *to* baptism, rather they argue *from* baptism.

Since the Churches of Christ have not had a guide or a lens that spells out clearly those basic tenets of the apostolic message, we have often allowed secondary or tertiary matters to be treated as essential issues that threaten the truth of the gospel, resulting in isolationism and division. We need an authoritative summary to help us distinguish non-negotiable truths from other important, though not core, matters of faith. And while leaders in the Churches of Christ would likely affirm each statement in the Apostles' Creed as representative of the core content of the faith,²⁴ it is unlikely that they would see the creed itself, in its fixed form, as authoritative. To use a prescription drug analogy, our leaders may have confidence in the powdery medication, itself (the truths stated in the Apostles' Creed), but would be hesitant, if not dubious, about the capsule form in which it comes (the Apostles' Creed as a fixed, authoritative summary). Baptism, however, is a capsule form that they already see as early, apostolic, and authoritative. They just need to acknowledge that it is not an empty shell. Once Restorationists recognize within their own practice of baptism the broad strokes of the Christian story, this comprehensive (un)systematic encapsulation could serve as an interpretive guide to prioritize doctrines and help navigate controversy. Of course, this is no panacea. In no way does it replace the need to study Scripture, pray for wisdom, and rely on the Spirit. But if a doctrinal dispute arises among leaders who read Scripture baptismally, they could at least discern the level of the threat. That is, if the doctrinal issue in question is not related to the content that is stored and expressed in Christian baptism—in its invocation, confessions, or symbolism—it is not a core tenet of the Christian faith. For example, does the dispute challenge the oneness of God as Father, Son, and Spirit? Does it deny the divinity or Lordship of Jesus? Does the teaching reject the presence and transforming power of the Holy Spirit? Does it undermine or deny the life, death, rising and ascension of Jesus, the forgiveness of sin, the hope of resurrection, or the church as the body of Christ? If not, then it is likely not an essential doctrinal matter and it would be an affront to the truth of the gospel to divide the church

²⁴ Though they might quibble with the phrase, “he descended into hell,” as others have.

over it. If leaders are able to discern with confidence that a disputable matter is non-essential, they could guide the church through the controversy with the expedience, wisdom, and consideration described in Romans 14–15.

It is not difficult to find people within the Churches of Christ who feel we have made too big of a deal of baptism. Many are embarrassed because our emphasis on baptism has built a wall between the Churches of Christ and the rest of Christendom. Not only have we isolated ourselves, we have splintered into factions within our own fellowship because our approach to Scripture has not brought clarity concerning how to distinguish essentials from non-essentials. What we have needed all along is an agreed upon theological center—a Trinitarian, Christocentric encapsulation of the apostolic faith. The answer has been right under our nose the whole time. What we need is the unifying theology *in* baptism. In this respect, the Churches of Christ have not made a big enough deal of baptism.

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