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Baptism

R. Wayne Stacy

I still recall the shocked look of disbelief and betrayal on her face. "I have to be what?" Julie was a rather sophisticated, urbane Episcopalian who had been attending our Baptist church for about two years when she finally decided to "take the plunge," shall we say, and convert to the Baptists. But when I told her that she would have to be immersed, she balked. "You mean, I have to be dunked in a tank of water in full view of the whole church with my hair streaming down my face and my makeup running and without benefit of so much as a shower cap or anything . . . you mean, before God and everybody?" I said: "Yes, Julie, that's what I'm saying. You see, the one thing we Baptists all have in common is wet hair." She said: "But it's so . . . so . . . inelegant!" And I said: "Precisely."

This is the one thing that Baptists stand for against the great mass of modern Christians. The Greek Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church, the High Church Episcopalians, and the Sacramental wing of the Disciples attach a redemptive value to one or both of the ordinances. It is just here that the term "Evangelical Christianity" comes in to emphasize the spiritual side of religion independent of rite and ceremony.¹

With these words the great Baptist linguist and Greek scholar, Professor A. T. Robertson, opened his address to the 1911 convocation of the Baptist World Alliance in Philadelphia, titled "The Spiritual Interpretation of the Ordinances." In it he delineated what he regarded as the quintessential Baptist theology of baptism: baptism of believers only, by immersion, and most important of all, as a symbol (not a sacrament) of one's participation in Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. With his statement few Baptists would disagree. And so that, as they say, would seem to be that.

But with Baptists, that is rarely ever "that." When you get two Baptists together to discuss any subject, you'll have at least three opinions. One of them, it seems, won't be able to make up his/her mind. Not surprisingly, Walter B. Shurden, in whose volume Robertson's address is cited, begins his book with the caveat: "These people [whose addresses are printed herein] did not speak for the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) any more than they spoke for their

individual Baptist communions or local Baptist churches. They spoke as Baptist individuals.”

Baptists, like other Protestants, affirm the autonomy of the individual soul and the priesthood of all believers. But unlike other Protestants, we Baptists are not just autonomous; we're belligerently autonomous! And so even though believer's baptism by immersion in a nonsacramental sense is perhaps the *sine qua non* of Baptist theology, Baptists, it seems, are even willing to argue about that! Go to some Baptist churches, and you'll likely hear Baptists “discussing” baptism rather loudly—everything from whether or not baptism “takes” in a “tank” to alien immersion. [For the record, I want to make it clear that I, personally, have never witnessed an “alien immersion”—though I once saw an alien autopsy on the TV show “X-Files”—but I have my doubts.]

In any case it is notoriously difficult to speak with authority on any issue of “Baptist theology.” For, indeed, there is no such thing as the “Baptist theology.” There are only Baptists' theologies. Even given Baptist diversity, however, one can find some common features to Baptist thinking.

Since Baptists, like other Protestants, affirm the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura*, they anchor their belief about baptism in the Scriptures rather than in any authoritative tradition, as, for example, in the Roman Church. For Baptists, if it cannot be demonstrated from the Scriptures, it is not authoritative, regardless of custom, tradition, or contemporary church practice. Therefore, I begin by discussing the origins of Christian baptism in terms of its antecedents in late second-temple Judaism and in the emergence and meaning of baptism in the New Testament. Then I will describe in broad parameters what I deem to be the Baptist consensus on the meaning of baptism. Finally, I will state my own theology of baptism, with the caveat that such constitutes only one individual Baptist's theology of baptism, nothing more and nothing less.

Baptism in the New Testament

Antecedents to Christian Baptism

There is considerable debate among New Testament scholars about the origin of Christian baptism. Part of the problem lies in the fact that the New Testament never addresses the issue. Rather, baptism is

introduced as something familiar to the reader, already part and parcel of the believer's experience.

Etymology offers some help. The New Testament word for baptism is *baptizo*, which means "to dip." As the late Baptist humorist Grady Nutt once observed, that makes Baptists "dippers," and our denomination the "Southern Dip Convention." The president of the Southern Baptist Convention, then, would be, he quipped, "the Big Dipper." The origin of the word, however, does provide some clue as to its meaning. The verb *baptizo* comes from the root *baph*, from which we get, by means of aspirated metathesis, our English word bath, from the Greek root *bath*.³

In the Septuagint *baptizo* translates the Hebrew, *tabhal*, to dip or immerse. From this root derives the word for Jewish proselyte baptism (*tebilah*), about which more will be said later. In the New Testament *baptizo* is used exclusively in the technical sense of immersion as an act of incorporation into Christ and his death.⁴

But when we move from etymology to antecedents, problems proliferate. Chief among them is the issue of origin. That Christianity began in the piety of second-temple Judaism is undeniable. That second-temple Judaism practiced baptism is also beyond dispute. But among the various expressions of Jewish "baptism" in the first century AD, to which does Christian baptism owe its primary origin: the Jewish *mikvah*, the baptism of John the Baptist, Jewish proselyte baptism, or the baptism practiced among the Essenes at Qumran?

One possibility is the Jewish *mikvah*. It is an important part of Jewish law to immerse oneself for purification.⁵ In Jewish theology one immerses oneself when life and death meet. In Judaism there is nothing more important than life; and when life and death meet in one's body, one becomes spiritually, that is, essentially, out of balance. The sense of *shalom*, the spiritual regularity of the world, is violated and must be restored. In Judaism, only living water can do that. You immerse yourself in a pool, a *mikvah*, to restore the *shalom*. A Jewish man will go to the *mikvah* when he feels a spiritual need for it; for example, before the Sabbath, before feasts or festivals, or some other time when he feels the need. A Jewish woman must go to the *mikvah* when life and death have met in her body, and that means either at the end of her monthly cycle or when she gives birth. Some believe that the Christian rite of baptism has its roots in this Jewish immersion ritual. Christian baptism, the ritual

purification through living water, is the Christian counterpart to the Jewish *mikvah* in which life and death meet in the waters of baptism so that the believer dies to an old life so as to be born to a new life.

Most New Testament scholars, however, would trace Christian baptism, at least to some extent, to that practiced by John the Baptist in the wilderness around the Jordan. That there was some overlap between the ministries of John and Jesus is clear from the New Testament record.⁶ John, as did Jesus, had disciples who practiced baptism.⁷ Both the baptisms of John and of the early church were eschatological rites in anticipation of the messianic age. Both were by immersion. Both were initiatory rites marking induction into a new community. And, of course, the New Testament affirms that, despite the overwhelming desire that surely must have been present to suppress it, Jesus himself was baptized by John in the Jordan. But what were the antecedents of John's baptism?

The answers have been two: Jewish proselyte baptism (*tebilah*) and the baptisms (*mikvaoth*) of the Covenanters of Qumran. Those who would argue for Jewish proselyte baptism as the background for John's practice point to the once-for-all nature of Jewish proselyte baptism, the initiatory status given to it in which a Gentile was incorporated into the people of Israel, and the fact that it involved immersion in water.⁸ Problematic for this view is the fact that proselyte baptism appears to have been self-administered, while John served as the prophetic agent for his baptism. Moreover, John baptized Jews, not Gentile proselytes. For John's baptism to have been based on proselyte baptism, it would have been necessary for John to have abandoned the people of God as the people of God, for which there is no evidence in the Gospels. Other scholars point out that Jewish proselyte baptism was primarily a "covenant ceremony" in which Gentiles, "strangers to the covenant of promise," were brought under the "yoke of the Torah," an emphasis largely missing from John's eschatological rite.

Gaining ground is the notion that the baptism of John owes its origin to the ritual baths the Covenanters of the Qumran community practiced daily.¹⁰ More than a dozen *mikvaoth* were found at Qumran, serving a community of only about 200 Essenes. Moreover, the *Rule of the Community* contains regulations regarding the practice of ritual purification among the Covenanters. Evidently, the Essenes were a messianic "baptist," reformation sect of Jews who

had protested the corruption of the Jerusalem temple cultus by retreating to the northwest shore of the Dead Sea there to immerse their community in preparation for the coming of the messiah. John the Baptizer, as the Fourth Gospel refers to him, also had apparently retreated to the wilderness to form a messianic "baptist," reformation sect immersing the people of God in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The fact that his movement was centered only about a mile or so from Qumran makes it difficult to believe that there should have been no connection between them.

But overriding all these antecedents is the baptism of Jesus, both his water baptism performed by John in the Jordan and his "baptism of death" on the cross.¹¹ These events more than any others provided the specific content of the early church's understanding of baptism. That Jesus was baptized by John is beyond dispute, vouchsafed by the fact that the early church found it necessary to explain it.¹² That Jesus would number himself with repentant Israel was problematic for the early church. But Jesus was apparently willing to risk misunderstanding at that point in order to identify himself with the sinners he came to save. His intention, apparently, was to create a new people of God out of just such ones as these. That God affirmed Jesus' chosen identity and mission is clear from the message declared by the heavenly voice, a conjoining of two Old Testament messianic texts affirming both Jesus' sonship and servanthood. Sonship was to be the shape of his unique identity, servanthood the shape of his mission. He would be the Son who accomplished his mission through serving and dying.

In Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism (3:13-17), christology and ecclesiology virtually merge into one. He begins by closing what he considers to be a crucial gap in the Markan account; namely, the implication that Jesus, along with all the other "sinners," came to John in the Jordan to be baptized. Matthew will have none of that. And so he has John demur by protesting to Jesus: "I have need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" The inference is clear: Jesus did not submit to baptism as a sinner. Then, Matthew makes explicit what was implicit in John's protestation when Jesus responds by saying: "Do it now, for in this way it is appropriate for us to fulfill all righteousness." That is to say, Jesus' baptism was an act of obedience to the righteous will of God.

As confirmation of the Son's obedience, the heavens open, a voice is heard, and the Spirit descends. Jews of Jesus' day would have regarded all of these phenomena as portents of the advent of the messianic age of the Kingdom. In the wake of divine silence in the Exile, Judaism's theodicy had relegated God to the sidelines of history. To them, God spoke only through the Torah. But among Jews of Jesus' day there was hope held out that in the last days God would once again become active in history with the appearance of the Messiah whose presence would be accompanied by divine manifestations such as the ones accompanying Jesus' baptism. As in Mark, the nature of the message declared by the heavenly voice is that Jesus is both God's Son and Servant. But whereas the Markan account emphasizes the former, Matthew's account emphasizes the latter.¹³ Though Jesus is Son, he is baptized as God's obedient Servant, thus modeling for the church the nature of authentic discipleship.¹⁴

What was implicit in Jesus' baptism became explicit in his teaching: there is a "baptism" that is not water baptism to which water baptism merely points. Jesus himself seems to have joined the ideas of baptism and death together when he said: "A baptism I have with which to be baptized, and how I am in anguish until it be completed."¹⁵ Moreover, Jesus made it clear that this "baptism" was not his alone, but would also be demanded of his followers, a necessary death through which he must bring his own in leading them to life.¹⁶ This other "baptism" became the object of much theological reflection as the early church began to articulate its theology of baptism. This is especially true of the apostle Paul.

Baptism in the Acts of the Apostles

When we come to Luke's account of the rise of the earliest church in the Acts of the Apostles, one thing becomes immediately clear: the first Christians understood themselves to be an eschatological community of the Kingdom that had dawned, they believed, in the events surrounding the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus of Nazareth.

The eschatological character of the early Christians' preaching as recorded in Acts is evident from the first sermon Peter preached at Pentecost. Following the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, Simon Peter stood up to interpret the associated phenomena by

announcing that the ecstatic speech that onlookers had witnessed when the Holy Spirit descended upon the assembled, praying Christian community was not the result of drunkenness, but was rather the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel who had predicted that in the last days God's Spirit would be "poured out upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams"¹⁷

As Peter made clear in that sermon, the earliest Christians believed that the manifestation of the Spirit at Pentecost, enabling them to fulfill Jesus' commission to them to be his "witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth," signaled the advent of the messianic age. The appropriate response to such an event, said Peter, is to "repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the Holy Spirit," one presumes, as an ensign that they, too, have entered the messianic age.¹⁸

In Acts, baptism, invariably associated with the proclamation of the advent of the messianic age, constitutes, along with repentance and faith, the appropriate response to the good news that the new age had dawned.¹⁹ Beyond that, however, it is difficult to identify any particular pattern in Acts. For example, at Pentecost the sequence was preaching, conviction, repentance, baptism, and the gift of the Spirit. But in Samaria (Acts 8:12ff.) the sequence was preaching, faith, baptism, laying on of hands, and the gift of the Spirit. For the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26ff.), the pattern was the reading of the Scriptures, preaching, and baptism, apparently with no laying on of hands and no mention of the coming of the Spirit. With Cornelius (Acts 10:44ff.) the sequence was preaching, the gift of the Spirit, the manifestation of tongues, and baptism. For the disciples of John at Ephesus (Acts 19:1ff.), the sequence was corrective teaching, baptism, laying on of hands, the gift of the Spirit, tongues, and prophecy. It is fair to say, then, that baptism in Acts is an eschatological act closely associated with preaching/teaching, repentance, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the forgiveness of sins, and functions as a response indicating one's faith and signifying one's acceptance of the gospel. That is to say, baptism is a sign, or indication, of conversion. But more than that the evidence will not support.

Baptism in the Letters of Paul

Paul's theology, too, is thoroughly eschatological.²⁰ He believed that in Jesus Christ the new age had dawned. The new thing that Paul adds to this fundamentally eschatological perspective that seems to have permeated the early church's theological reflection about the significance of Jesus is the idea of "Christ mysticism." For Paul, the advent of the Kingdom of God heralded by Jesus and his immediate followers had become virtually identified with the Risen Christ. For Paul, to be in the Kingdom is to be in Christ. Through union with Christ we are delivered from this evil age and here and now participate in the powers of the new age to come.²¹

For Paul, this union with Christ involved a transformation of the profoundest sort. So countercultural and catastrophic was this metamorphosis that Paul likened it to death to an old way of life and birth to an utterly new way of life:

Do you not know that as many of you as have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were, therefore, buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the father, so also we in newness of life should walk.²²

Baptism, then, functions for Paul, even as it did for Luke in Acts, as a sign of a conversion so profound that only it will prepare one adequately for life in the new age. The death that the believer dies, s/he dies in union with Christ. It is not just a death to aspects of one's self, it is a death to self, a yielding up of one's life to another. For Paul, this baptism into the death of Christ is overtly expressed in water baptism but is never to be confused with water baptism.

In Galatians 3:27 and elsewhere, Paul's Christ-mysticism is extended beyond union with Christ in his death to union with Christ in his life: "For whichever ones of you were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." The imagery is that of putting on Christ as one puts on a robe. Elsewhere Paul extends this metaphor to "taking off" the old life and "putting on" the new life in Christ.²³ Here, too, baptism may be the metaphorical symbol of the spiritual transformation occurring in the believer in that typically the baptizand would strip off his/her clothes before being baptized as a symbol of stripping off the old life and following his/her baptism would put on a new robe as a symbol of new life in Christ.

Perhaps the most remarkable analogy Paul employed for baptism was that it was the Christian's circumcision:

In whom also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands in the putting off of the body of flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in whom also you were raised together through faith which is energized by God who raised him from the dead.²⁴

Paul seems to pick up the idea that circumcision in Judaism involved "putting off" a part of the body as a sign that one belonged to God and attaches it to the Christian rite of baptism as a "putting off" of the entire body of flesh in a "circumcision not made with hands." Baptism, in this analogy, functions as the *sine qua non* of the Christian's identity just as circumcision had functioned as the *sine qua non* of the Jew's identity. Just as circumcision was the initiatory rite of entry into the community of the people of God, Israel; so now baptism is the initiatory rite of entry into the new people of God, the Church.

Although baptism is not discussed in the passage, Romans 5:12ff. is significant for any discussion of baptism in that it is the biblical *locus classicus* for the doctrine of original sin, the dogmatic presupposition underlying the practice of paedobaptism, or the baptism of infants or small children.²⁵ Biblically, the concept of original sin "originates" with the Vulgate's mistranslation of this passage when it rendered verse 12 from the original Greek into Latin as follows: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin, even so death spread unto all men [through the one man] in whom [*en quo*] all sinned."²⁶ The assumption was that the reference was to Adam, and that Paul had in mind some notion of original sin biologically transmitted from one generation to another.

That interpretation subsequently became the official dogma of the Roman Catholic church, and, abetted by Calvin's concept of total depravity, has also become the dominant view in much popular Protestant theology. Scholarly opinion, however, is virtually unanimous that the key Greek phrase, *eph ho*, is idiomatic Greek for "in that," "inasmuch as," or "because."²⁷ The correct translation, then, is: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world and death through sin, even so death spread unto all men

inasmuch as all sinned." Paul's point is that we are sinners not because of something Adam did, but because of what we all, as a matter of course, in fact do.

In good Jewish fashion Paul is composing a midrash on the Genesis account of Adam's fall in which he, consistent with the Jewish theology of his day, stresses the tension between the inescapableness of human sin on the one hand, and the recognition of human responsibility and accountability for sin on the other. It is the Jewish version of the old debate between "nature" and "nurture," or between determinism and freedom. Today this discussion might take the form of a debate between human responsibility for our actions versus the constraints placed on us by genetics or gender or education or social opportunity. But to interpret this passage as biblical support for the notion of some sort of theory of the biological transmission of sin, with neither the knowledge nor consent of the sinner involved, is not warranted by the text.

Baptism in 1 Peter 3:21

The New Testament text that attaches the greatest significance to baptism is 1 Peter 3:21: "Baptism, which also [is] an antitype, now saves you, not the putting off of the dirt of the flesh, but an answer of a good conscience before God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ."²⁸ The context is concerned with encouraging Christians who are undergoing persecution by pointing out that Christ has triumphed over all his enemies, and, therefore, so also will they. The explicit reference is to an intertestamental tradition that Enoch, when being translated to heaven, stopped off to preach judgment to the disobedient spirits, the *bene ha Elohim*, of the days of Noah.²⁹ The reference to Noah led to the statement that "eight souls were saved through water." The eight in the time of Noah were saved through the very water that threatened to destroy them. In the same way, so the writer seems to be saying, baptism, which symbolizes a death to one way of life and a birth to another, both destroys and saves. It is a picture that, as Jesus said, "one must lose one's life to save it." The imagery, therefore, is another variation on the theme, consistent in the New Testament, that baptism pictures a conversion of the most profound sort.

From this survey of the New Testament evidence regarding baptism, the following points may be adduced.

- Baptism in the New Testament was always by immersion.
- Baptism in the New Testament was an eschatological act both signaling the advent of the new age and serving as an act of initiation into it.
- While the specific Jewish antecedents of baptism are difficult to identify with precision, it appears certain that baptism functioned for Christians, even as it did for Jews, as an act of spiritual cleansing associated with the confluence of life and death in the person of the baptized.
- As such, baptism was associated with conversion, the inner transformation of the believer of the profoundest sort.
- Baptism in the New Testament was a confessional act, functioning as faith's response to the proclamation of the gospel.
- Baptism in the New Testament was a community act, initiating one into the community of the new age.
- Baptism in the New Testament was called neither symbol nor sacrament, and neither term is wholly adequate to express what the New Testament means by baptism. To call it a sacrament is to suggest something magical, that it works all by itself (*ex opera operato*), and the New Testament evidence will not support such a view. By the same token, calling baptism a symbol suggests that it is merely an arbitrary metaphor, completely inadequate to depict a spiritual transformation so catastrophic, so complete, so countercultural that it can only be properly described as "death" and "rebirth." The theological reflection on baptism in the Letters of Paul indicates that there is nothing "arbitrary" about this particular "symbol." It is a symbol with inherent power.³⁰

Baptist Theology of Baptism

With the disclaimer that no Baptist can speak for another clearly in view, I shall summarize now what I regard as the "typical" Baptist theology of baptism.³¹ Chief among Baptist principles governing the appropriate administration of baptism is the idea usually referred to as "believer's baptism."³² In Baptist theology it is related to the concept of a "regenerate church membership," meaning that baptism must be administered after faith, not prior to it, and that it must be the conscious, free, and voluntary act of the believer. Baptism is a human response of faith, not a divine act of grace.³³ It is on this ground that Baptists reject infant baptism. H. Wheeler Robinson, a Baptist and former principal of Regent's Park College, Oxford, put it this way:

The common element in all these interpretations of baptism is the necessary passivity of the infant baptized. Whether baptism be called dedication, or covenanting by parents, or sealing of a divine covenant, or an actual regeneration, it is throughout something done to, nothing done by, the baptized. So far as he is concerned, all of them are non-moral acts, though the act of the parents or sponsors is properly moral. The Baptist position is not simply a new phase of this succession of interpretations; it stands outside of them all as the only baptism which is strictly and primarily an ethical act on the part of the baptized.³⁴

To put it succinctly, Baptists disbelieve in surrogate faith. The encounter with God required for salvation and regeneration is necessarily an individual encounter.

Moreover, Baptists believe that immersion is the only appropriate mode for the administration of baptism.³⁵ The Baptist distrust of authoritative tradition drives them to the New Testament model for baptism as immersion only; and as we have already seen, immersion is an especially appropriate picture for the Pauline and Petrine imagery that death and life meet in baptismal waters. The earliest evidence of a mode other than immersion being employed for Christian baptism comes from the *Didache*, or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, which dates to the early second-century AD. The key passage translates as follows:

Now concerning baptism, baptize in this way. Having before spoken all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water. And if you should not have living water, baptize in other water [i.e. water of the same kind]. And if you are not able [to baptize] in cold [water], [then baptize] in hot. And if neither you should have, pour water three times on the head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.³⁶

The text is early and permits modes of baptism other than immersion. However, the tenor of the argument in which alternative modes are permitted is clearly concessionary and accommodationist: You should baptize in living water; but if living water is unavailable, it's permissible to baptize in cold water; but if cold water is unavailable, it's permissible to baptize in hot water, etc. By extension of the principle, I presume you could say: "If you can't immerse in running water, use a pool; if you can't use a pool, pour; if you can't pour, sprinkle, and if you can't sprinkle, I guess you could spit!" Baptists uniformly employ the New Testament model of immersion, although we rarely any longer do so in "living water," and I notice that even though we immerse, we like to have our baptisteries heated, a clear violation of the spirit of the *Didache!*

The third thing most Baptists would agree on is that baptism is an ordinance, not a sacrament.³⁷ That is to say, the act does not by itself bestow grace. Among Baptists, George Beasley-Murray perhaps has espoused the view nearest to a sacramental one. And yet, even Beasley-Murray cautions that the Bible, from the time of the prophets on, is at one in criticizing the notion of a purely external, automatic, materialistic view of religious objects and actions.³⁸ Moreover, as I indicated at the outset of this chapter, the great Baptist New Testament scholar, A. T. Robertson, regarded this as the *sine qua non* of Baptist theology, separating us from, in his words, "the great mass of modern Christians."³⁹

These three things, then, I would regard as the key components of Baptist thinking about baptism: believer's baptism, by immersion, as a symbol (rather than a sacrament) of grace. As such, baptism's centrality in Baptist life is indicated by the fact that the immersion pool (baptistery) typically occupies the highest, central, most visible place in a Baptist church.

A Baptist's Theology of Baptism

The earliest Christian confession was, *Iesous Kyrios*, "Jesus is Lord."⁴⁰ Indeed, the distinguishing mark of a Christian in the early church was one's willingness publicly to confess faith in the words: "Jesus [Christ] is Lord."⁴¹

I witnessed that firsthand some years ago in the Caribbean. I had taken some seminarians to the Islands to work with a missionary for a few weeks. While we were there, several of the islanders made professions of their faith in Jesus. On the final Sunday before we departed, the missionary and I conducted a baptismal service in the ocean at beach side. The nationals had been reluctant to attend the services we had conducted. Many feared that there would be reprisals against them from the local authorities who objected to our presence there. But when we waded out into the water to baptize Peter, a young believer who was a local woodworker in the village, scores of townsfolk gathered on the beach to watch. I commented to the missionary: "Isn't it wonderful that so many of Peter's neighbors would come out to support him like this!" And the missionary laughed and said: "They're not here to support Peter. They're here taking names!" That was as close as I've come to New Testament baptism.

It's a powerful rite in which life and death, God and humanity, sin and grace meet in a cold, wet, cleansing bath. Despite our attempts to tame it—from roses to heated pools to gold-plated fonts—it still whispers of a wild-eyed prophet screaming in the desert about another world a-comin'. It's inelegant, undignified, humiliating—not a bad symbol, if you think about it, for a transformation so radical that it can rightly be called "death to an old way of life, and birth to a new."

When I baptize, I often speak from the water about the character of what we do. I say:

When you join the Lion's Club or the Rotary Club, they shake your hand, pat you on the back, give you a pin and send you on your way pretty much as you were before. But when you join the church, we strip you naked as the day you were born, throw you in the water, half drown you, and then when you come up sputtering and spewing, we embrace you and call you "brother" and "sister." When you think about it, that's not bad preparation for

life in the Kingdom of God, a way of living in the world that will make you odd, set you against culture, make you act “funny” and feel “funny” and live “funny.” We call it “baptism.”

As a Baptist, I am often embarrassed at how anemic our Baptist theology of baptism has become. Baptists, of all people, should seek to understand and communicate the power of this powerful symbol. But too often baptism is a forethought in our services, perfunctorily performed as a prelude to the “real” worship, or an afterthought tacked on like a useless appendage to the end. Baptists who rail against the mechanism and magic of the sacramentalists, insisting that a symbol without significance is meaningless at best, magic at worst, too often themselves reduce the rite to mere formalism and pedantry.

Theologically, we seem oblivious to the logical inconsistency of claiming, as Baptists often do, that baptism is a “mere symbol,” and then at the same time arguing that it doesn’t “take” if enough water isn’t used. We excoriate the paedobaptists for baptizing unbelieving infants, insisting that baptism doesn’t “take” unless the baptized “understands what s/he is doing.” And yet, we baptize children, some as young as three or four, who have about as much understanding of conversion as most adults have of quantum mechanics. Besides, who among us who were baptized as adults really “understood” what we did when we submitted to the water? Twenty-nine years ago I stood before my good friend George Balentine and, when he asked whether or not I take this woman to be my wedded wife, I said: “I do.” I thought I understood what I was doing. But now, twenty-nine years later, I’m still trying to “understand” what I said when I said “I do.” And so it is with my baptism. If one has to “understand” before one can appropriately submit to baptism, then would somebody please identify for me that absolute, non-negotiable “something” that must be understood? And even if we could establish such a thing, who among us will decide when it is properly “understood?”

No. There is much muddled thinking among us Baptists about baptism. And while I claim no special insight in this regard, I would venture a description of baptism that, at this point in my thinking, satisfies me. It is one Baptist’s theology of baptism.

I would describe baptism as a sign signifying to all the beginning of a lifelong process of conversion to that Kingdom God revealed in Jesus Christ and one's adoption into the community of the kingdom people he is creating. I will comment briefly on each element of this description.

"A sign"

I prefer "sign" to "symbol" because whereas a symbol can be arbitrary, a sign participates in the reality of that which it signifies (The number "3" is a symbol of the idea of "threeness." The Roman numeral III is a sign.). Baptism is more than a mere symbol. The act of being buried beneath the water and being raised from underneath the water is a sign of the very kind of death and life that conversion demands. Some symbols say things. Some symbols do things. Baptism doesn't just say something; it does something. It is the spiritual heir of the Old Testament "prophetic act" in which the prophet "acted out" the word of God predicated on the idea that God's word can be stated and performed.⁴² It sets in motion the action it represents. Therefore, it is a mistake to refer to baptism as a "mere symbol." There is nothing "mere" about baptism. My teacher and mentor, Frank Stagg, says it well with an analogy to a wedding:

Water baptism is to the union with Christ what a wedding is to a marriage. Each presupposes a previous commitment, and each is a commitment. A wedding ring is a symbol, but a wedding is more than a symbol. In a wedding the mutual commitments already made in private are brought to outward expression in community. A wedding alone is not a marriage. Even so, water baptism without a previous personal commitment to Jesus Christ is but an empty gesture. . . . Since some cultures do not have what we know as a wedding, a marriage may be a marriage without a wedding. But a wedding adds immeasurably to the beauty and sacredness of a marriage. Even so, union with Christ can be real apart from water baptism, but baptism adds to the beauty and sacredness of that union.⁴³

"Signifying a lifelong process of conversion"

The Christian life is not some slow, perfectly natural, inexorable, orderly process of faith development toward some esoteric goal of psychic wellness. It is, as Will Willimon says, "detoxification."⁴⁴ As

Will quips: "None of us takes naturally to water."⁴⁵ It is "hydrotherapeutic repentance."⁴⁶ And repentance, as C. S. Lewis reminds us, is no fun at all!

It means killing a part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death. . . . Remember, this repentance, this willing submission to humiliation and a kind of death, is not something God demands of you before He will take you back and which He could let you off if He chose: it is simply a description of what going back to Him is like. If you ask God to take you back without it, you are really asking Him to let you go back without going back. It cannot happen.⁴⁷

But neither is conversion some fleeting, momentary, ephemeral experience like Camelot that, once lost, can never again be regained. The salvation of which the New Testament speaks, this coming back to God, is more journey than event, though it is event. Thomas Oden talks about "the five days" of the believer's life: the day one is born, the day one is baptized, the day one is confirmed, the day one enters into a lifelong covenant of fidelity in marriage, the day one dies.⁴⁸ Baptism, as a rite of conversion or commencement, is well suited to signify the onset of this process, but is not very well suited to signify the continuation of it. Because we Baptists have jettisoned virtually all the rituals of the church, fearing formalism, we have tended to "front load" baptism with too much theology while ignoring the rest of the life of discipleship. It is for that reason that in most Baptist churches "rededication of one's life" has become the Baptist counterpart to confirmation, a rite of continuation and identification in sacramental traditions.⁴⁹

Personally, I like the Roman Catholic idea of the sacrament as *viaticum* (from the Latin *via*, meaning "way"), the administration of the Eucharist to the dying as provision for the final leg of the "way" through life, literally "one for the road."⁵⁰ It seems to me that this ritual of affirming the presence of God on the journey, including its final leg, may have some application to a healthy biblical and ecclesiastical soteriology. Indeed, the concept of *viaticum*, God with us all along the way from womb to tomb, is much closer to the New Testament concept of salvation than the popular Baptist notion of salvation conceived of as an isolated event, largely emotional, that is accessed in the present only as memory. In the New Testament salvation is a vital, dynamic, synergistic experience with God through

Christ into which one grows throughout one's entire life.⁵¹ In short, it is *viaticum*, God with us all along the way, changing us, redeeming us, saving us, making us his own.

It occurs to me: if this concept of *viaticum* as a primary soteriological metaphor could be extended to include the entirety of the Christian life and not just the last leg of it, with appropriate rituals along the way, baptism being but one of them, I think it could help significantly to assuage our Baptist propensity to reduce salvation to a single event that one was forced to try to relive or recapture over and over again as life moves in and out of its various vicissitudes. Both our understandings of ourselves and of God change as we move through life. Salvation cannot mean for me in my adolescence what it means in my adulthood. To freeze faith in its nascency is a denial of the New Testament teaching on salvation, the grace of God, and our character as persons.

Moreover, human beings are both cognitive and affective, thinking and feeling, knowing and doing creatures. There are times when just *saying* faith isn't enough; we need to *do* faith. That is particularly true if faith is more journey than event. We all need *viaticum*, those rituals of faith, those "rites of passage" that tap us on the shoulder at various watershed moments of our lives (the birth of a child, our emergence into adulthood, our marriage, at illness and death), and whisper: "Pssst. Don't forget, God is here too!"

It is at this point that, it seems to me, even Baptists need some "rite of Christian commencement"—baptism at birth, baby dedication, or something similar—to signify the beginning of this process, some "ritual of adoption" into the people of God that signals the advent of the journey and the presence of God at its outset. Such a ritual becomes an initiation of the *viaticum*, in which both parents and people own for the child what someday, if all do their job well, the child will own for him/herself. Farther along "on the way," then, believer's baptism can become as it were the Baptist counterpart to confirmation, the event in which one owns for oneself what was owned for him/her when one was a child. Without some ritual of *viaticum* ("setting a child out on his/her way to God"), Baptists are forced to admit that we really have no theology for children and either treat them as adults and baptize them as "infants" (as early as two and three years old), or put them off until they "understand what they're doing"—whatever that means, whenever that is.

“Signifying . . . one’s adoption into the community”

Our Baptist proclivity toward individualism has caused us to undervalue the communal aspect of salvation. From the first, baptism was not a purely private affair, but rather signified one’s incorporation into the eschatological people of God. Origen once said: “There is no salvation outside the church,” and in the sense in which he meant it, I take him to be correct. Baptism does not mean whatever we as individuals want it to mean. It means what the church says it means. Indeed, baptism “means” church. Baptism is not initiation into some private, inner life of narcissistic self-reflection. It is, by its very nature, an act of community. You don’t know what your baptism means until the church teaches you. You don’t know what you did when you were baptized until the church tells you. You don’t know who you are until the church tells you. Indeed, the major work of the church lies just here: disabusing you of the false and bankrupt notions of who you really are with which the world has seduced and confused and corrupted you. Richard John Neuhaus, when asked about his conversion to Roman Catholicism, replied:

It is not quite accurate to say I “converted” to Roman Catholicism. I was converted at three weeks of age when I was baptized. Every day is a day of baptismal conversion, of dying and rising again with Christ, of taking new steps toward becoming more fully what, by the grace of God, we most truly are.⁵²

Baptism is the place where this “dying and rising” is best signified. It’s a powerful rite in which life and death, God and humanity, sin and grace meet in a cold, wet, cleansing bath. It’s a messy, inelegant, humiliating, holy business. It’s stripping down, letting go, giving up, so that we, in the life God gives us, might rise again.

“But it’s so . . . so . . . inelegant,” she said. Precisely. Significantly. Horribly. I remind you: none of us takes naturally to water. John Donne, I think, caught a glimpse of it when he wrote in Holy Sonnet 14:

Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You
As yet knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.⁵³

Notes

¹A. T. Robertson, "The Spiritual Interpretation of the Ordinances," in *The Life of Baptists in the Life of the World: 80 Years of the Baptist World Alliance*, Walter B. Shurden, ed. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1985) 50.

²Shurden, preface.

³Cf. *bathos*, "deep," etc.

⁴There is no evidence in the New Testament that baptism was ever administered through any mode other than immersion. Even Karl Barth, himself a Lutheran whose tradition practiced infant baptism by sprinkling, was forced to admit that the New Testament evidence is clear in this regard. See Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* (London: SCM Press, 1963) 40ff. So also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1993) 226ff; 240ff.

⁵One of the tractates in the *Mishnah*, "*Mikvaoth*," deals exclusively with purification rituals associated with immersion pools.

⁶Though the Fourth Gospel attempts to minimize the impact of John's ministry on Jesus, the Synoptics agree that Jesus' ministry commences with the arrest of John, and that in some sense Jesus regarded his own ministry as a continuation of that of the Baptist's.

⁷Cf. John 4:1-2. See also Acts 18:25.

⁸Frank Stagg, *New Testament Theology* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1962) 208-209.

⁹George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (London: Paternoster Press, 1962) 41.

¹⁰Ibid. See also Otto Betz, "Was John the Baptist an Essene?" *Bible Review* (December 1990).

¹¹Cf. Mark 10:38.

¹²A comparison of Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism with Mark's account makes it clear that Matthew found problematic Mark's straightforward statement that in the days when John was preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, among the "sinners" who came out to the Jordan to be baptized by John was Jesus. Incidentally, comparisons such as this argue persuasively for Markan priority.

¹³In 12:18ff. Matthew cites the entire First Servant Song (Isa 42:1-4), the longest scriptural quotation in the Gospel of Matthew.

¹⁴The linking of baptism as the sign of obedient servanthood with the making of disciples in the church is made explicit in the so-called Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). The authenticity of the passage has long been contested and defended. For a discussion of the arguments, see Beasley-Murray, 77-92.

¹⁵Luke 12:50, author's translation. See also Mark 10:38ff.

¹⁶"The cup of which I drink you will drink, and the baptism with which I am baptized you will be baptized" (Mark 10:39, author's translation).

¹⁷Acts 2:16ff. Cf. Joel 2:1-5.

¹⁸Acts 2:38.

¹⁹That baptism in Acts was immersion is not threatened by the fact that Acts records that some entire "households" were converted and baptized. In the Roman

world, the religion of the *pater familias* became the religion of the entire household, so that when a pagan converted to Christianity, so also did his family, slaves, and servants. The fact that such a household would have included infants and small children does not automatically imply that they, too, were immersed, though it does not preclude it either. However, the fact that Acts records that ecstatic gifts typically accompanied the conversion of a household would suggest that infants were not included.

²⁰See, for example, James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Valley Forge PA: Trinity Press, 1993) 21ff; George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 397ff; Robin Scroggs, *Paul for a New Day* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), passim.

²¹Cf. Rom 6:3; 8:18-30; Gal 3:27.

²²Rom 6:3-4, author's translation.

²³Cf. Eph 4:22ff; 6:11ff.

²⁴Cf. Col 2:11-12, author's translation.

²⁵"Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin, children also have need of the new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called." *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1994) 319. Origen (d. AD 251) is the earliest source of the tradition that the Apostles enjoined the baptism of children, "The Church has received a tradition from the Apostles to give baptism even to little children." The credibility of this tradition, however, is a matter of much dispute. See Beasley-Murray, 306.

²⁶For a full discussion of the debate related to the correct translation of Rom 5:12, see C. E. B. Cranfield, "On Some Problems in the Interpretation of Rom 5:12." *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 22 (1969): 324-41.

²⁷See 2 Cor 5:4 and Phil 3:12 where Paul uses the same phrase clearly meaning "because." Cf. C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38A (Dallas: Word Books, 1988) 273.

²⁸Author's translation.

²⁹See Bo Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard Forlag, 1946), for the definitive treatment of this text.

³⁰Cf. Beasley-Murray, 262ff.

³¹I choose the term "typical" because, on the one hand, there really is no "orthodox" Baptist position on baptism, and on the other hand, to recognize the fact that what I am about to describe would not be representative of the baptismal practices of all Baptists. The three principles articulated here, however, I believe would find broad agreement among most Baptists.

³²Cf. Robert G. Torbet, *A History of the Baptists*, 3rd ed. (Valley Forge PA: Judson Press, 1973) 516.

³³It is at this point that notions of "prevenient grace" enter the conversation. Theologians of both the Roman traditions and the paedobaptist Protestant traditions stress the biblical idea of divine initiative prior to the human response of faith, symbolized by the fact that the child is unable to have faith by him/herself and requires his/her parents to "faith" for him/her as a picture of God's prevenient

grace in our behalf; cf. "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son . . . for us" (1 John 4:10).

³⁴H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Life and Faith of the Baptists* (London: Kingsgate Press, 1946) 73.

³⁵I find it telling that the Baptist scholar George Beasley-Murray in his definitive work on baptism in the New Testament barely even addresses other modes of baptism. He dispatches the notion that New Testament baptism could have been administered by a mode other than immersion in one page! See Beasley-Murray, 133.

³⁶Allen Wikgren, *Hellenistic Greek Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949) 104. Author's translation.

³⁷The word "ordinance" comes from the Latin *ordo* meaning "to order something." It has to do with a "directive or command" of an authoritative nature. Hence, it has come to be applied to established religious rites such as baptism and communion in that these acts can be seen as responses to specific "commands" or "ordinances" of Jesus (See Matt 28:19; 1 Cor 11:24). A "sacrament," on the other hand, bestows grace on the participant in the ritual.

³⁸Beasley-Murray, 300.

³⁹Cited in Shurden, 50

⁴⁰1 Cor 12:3.

⁴¹Cf. I. Howard Marshall, *The Origins of New Testament Christology* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976) 97.

⁴²Cf. Beasley-Murray, 43.

⁴³Stagg, 234.

⁴⁴William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 63.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 54.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁷C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1981) 49.

⁴⁸Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) 85.

⁴⁹Incidentally, it is not coincidental that rededication tends to occur most frequently at about the same age as confirmation in the sacramental traditions, namely, the onset of puberty. When young people enter adolescence, their emerging sense of selfhood precipitates a crisis of faith as well as of personal identity.

⁵⁰*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 381.

⁵¹The language of salvation in the New Testament is rich, incorporating images and metaphors that speak of God's saving work as accomplished fact (1 Cor 6:11), present reality (1 Cor 1:18), and future goal (1 Pet 1:9). That Baptists have recognized this dynamic character of the New Testament teaching on salvation is evinced by *The Baptist Faith and Message Statement's* article on "salvation." The *Statement* defines salvation in terms of three aspects or qualities (corresponding to the past, present, and future qualities of the New Testament teaching on salvation): regeneration, sanctification, and glorification.

⁵²Quoted in Willimon, 63.

⁵³*The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Vol. I, rev. ed., M. H. Abrams, gen. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton Co., Inc., 1968) 909.