

A Bridge over Troubled Waters

BAPTISM

– some radical and perhaps liberating thoughts –

The following is a (perhaps) fresh and idiosyncratic look at the knotty issue of baptism. Novelty must never be the arbiter of truth, but then neither must tradition – sacred cows sometimes do get slaughtered and perhaps should be oftener. Idiosyncrasy can often be the product of the simple desire (or need) to be different for the sake of being different, but I hope and trust the following is not born of such contrariness. There is a certain tongue-in-cheek-ness about the ensuing study, but there is a certain sincerity and integrity to it as well, even if the final conclusion is just slightly too outrageous to be taken altogether seriously.

**“novelty must never be the arbiter of truth,
but then neither must tradition”**

Christians are divided into two camps on the matter of baptism. There are those who have an Opinion on the subject, and those who don't. Those who don't are perhaps those who have never thought about the matter, or who have thought about it and given up the struggle, and perhaps make up the masses in our various denominations and congregations who simply assume that the way their church does it (and theologises it) is the way it should be done (and theologised); and maybe there are some who don't care, or who don't think baptism belief and practice matter one way or the other.

Those who do have an Opinion are in turn clearly divided into two camps, the infant-baptists and the believer-baptists as I shall call them (both are misnomers up to a point). The battle between these Opinions has raged fiercely over twenty centuries. The believer-baptist view insists that it's only legitimate to baptise people following a public profession of Christian faith, the faith of the baptism candidate publicly declared being the determining and dominant factor. The arguments for this position are well known and needn't be rehearsed here, but perhaps it will be useful to observe that their opponents (the infant-baptists) have often claimed that faith has been elevated to the status of a 'work-contributing-to-salvation' (or 'human boasting') in the believer-baptist position.

On the infant-baptist view, on the other hand, it is the covenantal grace of God and not the publicly declared faith of a person which is claimed to be the determining and dominant factor. Again, the arguments for this are well-known (built upon covenant theology, and consequently emphasising the family nature of baptism; and sometimes suggesting 'Christian family baptism' as an alternative term to 'infant baptism' – oblivious to or neglectful of the obvious possibility that the believer-baptist camp could equally well appropriate such a term to its own position). By way of example, whereas infant-baptists often point out that the whole household of the Philippian jailer was baptised, believer-baptists retort that the text does not say there were any children and does say that all the household believed. The opponents of the infant-baptist view usually claim that it has ignored the frequent scriptural connection which they allege between baptism and the believer's testimony of faith. They also maintain that the covenantal argument (which usually seeks to demonstrate, citing Colossians 2:11-12, that baptism of children within the family is the natural Christian progression from infant circumcision) is flawed.

**“even open-infant-baptists insist on
a verbal declaration of faith”**

The infant-baptist camp is itself, of course, split down the middle into the advocates of open-baptism who argue that children should be baptised without restriction (i.e. with no requirement for parents, godparents, etc., to be Christian believers), and the advocates of restricted-baptism who argue that only the children of church-going Christian parents should be baptised. Again this debate is well known and need not concern us here. But it may be useful in passing to note that the restricted-infant-baptist view arguably has as much in common with the believer-baptist position (publicly declared faith is the determining and dominant factor, of the parents and/or godparents in the one case and of the convert in the other) as it has in common with open-infant-baptism (an emphasis on covenantal grace, and babies!). Actually, even open-infant-baptists insist on a verbal declaration of faith (and of intended church membership) at a baptism service – at least it does in, for instance, the Anglican liturgy, requiring as this does the response “I am willing ... I turn ... I repent ... I renounce ... I believe ... I believe ... I believe ...”. This is an interesting point – is there a version of infant baptism out there somewhere which requires no statement of Christian faith by parents or godparents/sponsors? For that matter, though this is a different point, is there a version of believer baptism out there somewhere which doesn’t make baptism a denominational or church membership issue – see next paragraph? (Incidentally, shouldn’t *any* doctrine of conversion fully emphasise both grace *and* faith?! Yes, of course – but does that mean that *baptism* as practised in the New Testament, or *baptism* as a term used in the New Testament, specifically indicates those central truths? Read on!)

**“it seems not so much a theological issue
as a denominational issue
and/or a church membership issue”**

What perturbs me most about the high-octane traditional views is that it all matters so much. In all of them, Baptism has got such a capital ‘B’, and these strongly held Opinions have got such capital ‘O’s. Each seems to me to be in bondage to its own sacramentalism. They are all highly defensive, if not obscurantist, charging one another with being seriously mistaken, and yet seeming oblivious to or dismissive of the seriousness of their own alleged flaws. No wonder the battles rage with all parties taking their stand on such doctrinally maximalist high ground. The whole caboodle is such an Issue (capital ‘I’), and, in some cases at least, it seems not so much a theological issue as a denominational issue and/or church membership issue. But I beg to ask, does it all have to be such a Big Deal? Or to put it another way, do we have to be quite so Sacramentalist or Denominationalist as each of these high-intensity theological viewpoints? And could it be that all the respective charges of ‘human boasting’ (of one stripe or another) made by each side against the other(s) are too close to the bone for comfort?

The following analysis will boldly set itself upon a different and I hope liberating course – it essentially argues that it all doesn’t have to be such a Big Deal; there’s another way of looking at ‘baptism’, and it’s one which makes much better sense of the New Testament’s teaching.

The traditional definition of a sacrament is “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”. This on its own of course is not adequate otherwise there would be a whole host of sacraments. For example, kneeling to pray would be a sacrament so long as it were a genuine expression of humility before God and not a meaningless ritual; and so would daily bible reading so long as it were born of a Spirit-given hunger for the Word of God. So the definition of a sacrament

has usually included the insistence also that it's a rite instituted by Christ himself and given to the Church as a 'pledge' (or 'sign' or 'means') of God's grace and goodness. On this basis, it is argued, holy communion (or whatever we call it) and baptism (or whatever we call it) are the only two sacraments.

**“the supposed sacrament-hood of communion and baptism
hang in each case upon a single text of scripture”**

This is intriguing because the supposed sacrament-hood of communion and baptism hang in each case upon a single text of scripture (1 Corinthians 11:24f, Matthew 28:19). It begs the question whether this is enough to support the two enormous edifices that baptism and holy communion have become historically. More seriously, is it enough to justify the highly charged Opinions which have been held and contended for so fiercely?

Interestingly, these single proof-texts allow (it can be argued) alternative interpretations which might (depending on one's point of view) throw doubt on the stability of the foundations upon which these edifices have been constructed. In the middle ages the reformers clearly rejected the sacramental theology of the Church of Rome, on the grounds of the misinterpretation of *sacramentum* in the Latin Vulgate and of the Aristotelian roots of much or indeed most of contemporary theology. Martin Luther had the courage to reduce the number of sacraments from seven down to three in one fell swoop, and then almost immediately deleted confession as well, leaving two. One might wonder if the remaining two could also be under threat. With respect to baptism, I will present an alternative thesis below. In respect of communion, a cogent and strong case has recently been made for the view that Christ never intended to institute it as a sacrament in the traditional sense (actually, not so recently – as long as a dozen or fifteen years ago I remember reading of and hearing this radical view being expounded. Recently it has been given more wide-spread notice – but perhaps not more wide-spread acceptance). Thus in the opinion of some the two sacraments have now become one, and the following paragraphs seek rather outrageously to reduce the one to none. Thus the somewhat (and some!) radical suggestion (suggestion only, mind you) of this paper is that sacramental theology, as usually understood by sacramentalist Christians (which, whether knowingly or unknowingly, is most Christians), should never have been lumped upon Baptism (and Holy Communion likewise).

**“baptism is a cleansing ritual ...
baptism is an initiatory ritual”**

Fundamentally John's baptism is a cleansing ritual; of that there can be little doubt. And in Old Testament Judaism and in Judaism as practised by the Essenes, Qumran community, etc., the word is used of ritual washings, both of vessels and of people, in cultic activity. The cleansing may be perceived as actual or as figurative, but it is from defilement nonetheless. The cleansing symbolism is likewise fundamental to New Testament baptism (see e.g. Acts 22:16) – that is to say, the baptism symbolises the washing away of the defilement of sin, both in John's and in Christian baptism; both are baptisms of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Baptism in the New Testament, I submit, has its prime reference to this and *not* to grace or to covenant or to the believer's testimony, however important these are in the doctrine of conversion.

The predominant context of NT baptismal references is repentance and cleansing from sin, not covenantal grace (whereas the predominant OT context of circumcision is covenantal grace, not cleansing). It is certainly true that we, following the overarching emphasis of the Word of God, champion the doctrine of the grace of God; it is certainly true that the doctrine of the grace of God

can be no more than a hair's breadth away from any biblical mention of Christian conversion; and it is certainly true that our hearts will be full of joy and wonder at the grace of God whenever the conversion of souls to Christ is in view. But it's quite another thing to then think it's legitimate to take a biblical text that connects conversion, baptism and cleansing from the defilement of sin, and make it into a text that connects conversion, baptism and the grace of God when actually it doesn't do exactly that.

**“an Old Testament antecedent to Christian baptism ...
not circumcision but the priestly washings”**

Also, baptism in the New Testament is an initiatory ritual. In other words, it signified, symbolised, denoted and demonstrated a radical change of position at the point of change. In repenting and being baptised John's listeners were accepting John's preaching and thus opting into his Kingdom movement. Likewise Christian converts were accepting the gospel, repenting and being baptised, and opting in to Christ's Kingdom. It's true, certainly, that in repenting initially converts were beginning a life of repentance; in coming to faith they were beginning a life of faith; in washing away their sins once they were beginning a life of washing – well has it been said that the only true mark of conversion in a Christian's subsequent Christian life is present convertedness. But baptism is the hallmark of the initial response rather than the ongoing living out of the conversion. The regular, ongoing ritual washings of Judaism were a necessary mark (ongoingly!) of the ongoing, never-finished priestly work, but this has now been fulfilled once and for all in Christ. Indeed, if I had to find an Old Testament antecedent to Christian baptism I would tend towards finding it not in circumcision (a covenant sealing rite) but in the priestly washings (a cleansing rite).

Jesus' own baptism by John demonstrated at least his own identification with sinful humanity and thus the need for man's, albeit not his own, repentance. “To fulfil all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15) might mean something like that at least. But there is a further suggestion that this enigmatic phrase refers also, or alternatively, to the high-priestly office he was embarking upon, and thus his baptism is his ‘ritual washing’ for this task.

John's baptism taken as a whole movement heralds the arrival of Christ and of the Kingdom of God (e.g. Acts 1:22, 10:37, 13:24 and 19:4, together with the various references at the beginning of all four gospels: Matthew 3:1-17, esp. 2-3,11, Mark 1:1-15, esp. 2-3,7-8,15, Luke 3:1-22, esp. 4-6,15-17, John 1:7-8,15, 23-27). And John's baptism movement has what seems to be a natural continuation in Jesus' baptism movement as recounted in the passage John 3:22-4:3. Jesus' disciples were baptising increasingly more people as John's movement began to wane before his arrest. No clear case can be made out (I submit) for supposing that baptism by Jesus' disciples meant anything more than baptism by John did (except perhaps in so far as Jesus' baptism signified the Kingdom-arriving as opposed to John's signifying the Kingdom-about-to-arrive). After all, the message which Jesus proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry is the same as that of John. Compare, for example, Mark 1:14-15 with Matthew 3:2/Mark 1:4. Jesus in Mark 1:15 calls for repentance and faith because the Kingdom is at hand; John in Matthew 3:2 calls for repentance because the Kingdom is at hand, but it's clear from Paul's teaching in Acts 19:4, and from John's “After me will come one who ...”, that John as well as Jesus was preaching repentance and faith in Christ.

**“no clear case can be made out for supposing
that baptism by Jesus' disciples meant anything more
than baptism by John did”**

Indeed we should note that the inadequacy of the Ephesians' 'conversion' under Apollos in Acts 18:24-19:7 was not so much that they had received John's baptism instead of Christian baptism, but rather that they had been given the wrong theology of John's baptism. Presumably Apollos had preached John's call for repentance towards God for the forgiveness of sins, and according to Acts 18:25 he had enthusiastically passed on accurate information about Jesus and his teaching ("the way of the Lord"). Further, he had a thorough knowledge of the scriptures (18:24), which for a pious Jew would have meant far more than mere factual knowledge; he would have understood the broad sweep of God's promise of future salvation. He may even have understood that John had a key role in it. But it seems (though the passage is still rather enigmatic) that he had not made the connection between John and Jesus Christ: he had failed to see that John's baptism was not an end in itself, but rather pointed forward in preparation for the Christ, and that John proclaimed Jesus to be the Christ.

**“the issue in Ephesus was a gospel issue –
their gospel had been a Holy-Spirit-less gospel
for the very reason that it had been a Christ-less gospel”**

The passage confirms Apollos' lack of understanding: it was observed at the time by Priscilla and Aquila who corrected the deficiency in an early example of a home-based Christian foundations course (18:26b)! Afterwards the Achaians reaped the benefit of this (18:27-28), but to the less fortunate Ephesians he had not preached John's call for faith in Christ. So the inadequacy of their baptism was not only that it was John's instead of Christian, but also that it was defective-John's instead of proper-John's. Perhaps we should say rather that it was the preaching rather than the baptism which was defective: not only had the Ephesians not been taught about the Holy Spirit but they hadn't even been taught about Christ (only about Jesus, which is different – see 18:28b). In fact it was John himself who connected the Holy Spirit and Christ ("I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit", Mark 1:8 and parallels and Acts 1:5). The issue in Ephesus was a gospel issue – their gospel had been a Holy-Spirit-less gospel for the very reason that it had been a Christ-less gospel.

**“John preached and baptised for repentance and faith
in Jesus Christ,
Jesus preached and baptised for repentance and faith
in Jesus Christ,
the Apostles preached and baptised for repentance and faith
in Jesus Christ”**

This is the important point: John preached and baptised for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, Jesus preached and baptised for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, and the Apostles preached and baptised for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. In terms of the response required, there is no possible wedge that can be driven between John's baptism and Christian baptism, I suggest.

[Note: it should be clear in context, when I speak of 'faith' in this paper, whether I'm referring to (a) the inseparable adjunct to repentance, as in the expression 'repentance and faith' – see Acts 20:21, Mark 1:15, Acts 19:4, Hebrews 6:1 and also Acts 11:17,18, all of which verses illustrate how the terms 'repentance towards God' and 'faith in Jesus Christ' sum up the totality of the Christian's response to God and belong together as two faces of the same coin, though in this paper we are thinking more of the initial response of repentance and faith than the ongoing life-long

response, or (b) 'the Christian faith' as an alternative term for 'Christianity', or (c) the public declaration of faith, as at a believer-baptism.]

Christian baptism, by which I mean baptism into the Christian faith after Pentecost, like its precursors, clearly signifies a radical change of position. Being a decisive and demonstrative act in itself, it served very usefully to sign, symbolise and demonstrate to the new convert the decisive and radical change of heart and life involved in becoming a Christian (that is to say, the early Christians were very clear that one didn't just drift casually into Christianity). Becoming a Christian was something not to be undertaken carelessly or lightly, but reverently and responsibly. The would-be Christian was transferring from the kingdom of the world to the kingdom of God, from darkness to light, from blindness to sight, from lost to found, from death to life, from slave to free, from enemy to friend, from the destiny of hell to the promise of heaven. The would-be Christian was opting in to a radically new and living Way (Acts 24:14, 9:2). Furthermore, it was very costly so to do because one's Christian life was public, and it was costly therefore to be baptised, too, because those who had been baptised as Christians were known about. There is scarcely any indication in the New Testament of the existence of secret disciples or nominal Christians. Their family, friends and enemies all knew what they had done, and this manifestly obvious change of heart and life was declared and reinforced by baptism, it being so clear a sign of cleansing and conversion (though it was declared and reinforced even more emphatically thereafter by a radically changed life lived sacrificially for Christ).

“the Christian faith is full gospel faith”

Furthermore, baptism was the naturally obvious sign and symbol to continue using given its precedent before and during the ministry of Jesus. Again, it was the natural continuation of what went before. However, with Christian baptism there are radically new dimensions. Not only does it express repentance towards God and faith in Christ for the forgiveness of sins, as with John's. Now also this repentance and faith has as its focus the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the confessing Christian now knows the basis upon which forgiveness for sins is received, and so there's a new clarity of understanding and assurance. The Christian faith is now full gospel faith. Beforehand, this cleansing rite of baptism was in anticipation of the gospel of Christ; now it's in the full knowledge and understanding of the gospel of his finished work.

“water baptism is the outward symbol, but spiritual baptism is the inward reality”

But there is another new dimension in Christian baptism. Although it's little different from John's baptism in terms of what the convert does, there is a new dimension to what God does. Now he not only gives forgiveness, but gives also his Holy Spirit. No wonder, then, that baptism is used as a term for this in Matthew 3:11 and parallels, “I baptise you with water for repentance ... He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit ...”. Water baptism is the outward symbol, but spiritual baptism is the inward reality – cleansing, renewal and new life in the Spirit. Again, we may say that Christian baptism is 'full gospel' baptism (or, equivalently, baptism “in the name of Jesus” – see Acts 8:12 for an example of how baptism in the name of Jesus essentially means baptism in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ), which, remember, is what the Ephesians had missed out on. There is no indication, though, that people who had been baptised under John were re-baptised 'Christianly'.

“with no great fuss it just got done”

Next, we need to observe that virtually all Christian conversions from the day of Pentecost onwards, so far as we know, were from non-Christian (albeit, possibly, pious) Judaism or from utter paganism. At this stage there were no instances of conversions of children brought up in Christian homes or of nominal Christians getting keened up. There is no apparent record in the New Testament of children being baptised at all. In other words, all conversions were radical and were signified by the radical rite of Christian baptism. It is also important to note that it was automatically assumed that a new convert would be baptised – with no great fuss it just got done. Conversion was always radical, public and costly. Baptism made it all the more public (and thus all the more costly) because if one were a baptised Christian one was known as a baptised Christian. Baptism made the conversion all the more radical because it identified one in an obvious, tangible and unmistakable way with the followers of Jesus Christ.

“in the early decades of the Christian era conversion and baptism were inseparably bound up with each other – they always belonged together”

It is an important point to remember that in the early decades of the Christian era conversion and baptism were inextricably linked and always belonged together. Baptism also seems to have been immediate. There was no ‘breathing space’ to ensure that the conversion stood the test of time, no ‘cooling off period’ to see if the convert lapsed. Nor, it seems, was it necessarily done in the presence of the Christian assembly. Nor was there any delay for ‘baptism preparation’ or catechism. Nor does it seem that a verbal profession of faith was normally or indeed ever required at baptism (despite Romans 10:9-10 which is not connected to baptism and is not even necessarily connected with the conversion event). A good example of this is in Acts 8:36-38 where the spurious v.37 seems to be the addition of a nervous second century scribe. There need be no shame in our supposing that a significant proportion of early baptised converts fell away in respect of both John’s and Jesus’ pre-Christian baptisms and post-Pentecost Christian baptisms. It’s the ‘high-octane’, ‘it-all-matters-so-much’, sacramentalist Opinions on baptism that find the falling away of baptised Christians to be so fraught.

**“baptised does not necessarily mean regenerate
baptised simply means baptised”**

This ought to sound warning bells, I suggest, for any viewpoint which over-exalts baptism. If my supposition is right, then ‘baptised’ does not necessarily mean ‘regenerate’ (despite the C of E prayers suggesting the contrary). ‘Baptised’ simply means ‘baptised’. A baptised person’s baptism will be for him either an important and lifelong sign and symbol of the step of faith which he once took and is now continuing to live and rejoice in, or it will be a lifelong embarrassment if he has fallen away. But note that where we read of baptism in the epistles, those addressed are in the former category. They are Christians who are continuing (albeit struggling) in the Christian faith. For them, their baptism, because it was immediate and automatic, meant essentially the same thing as their conversion, and because of its obviousness as an outward sign, it was natural for these Christians and indeed the epistle writers to refer to their conversion by referring to their baptism. In other words, because their baptism was the event which denoted their coming to Christ, to refer to their baptism = to refer to their conversion – but note, the equation is this and not ‘baptism = conversion’ (though baptism might possibly be regarded as part of the conversion process – see later). To put it another way, baptism became a code-word for describing conversion.

“baptism became a code-word for conversion”

A Christian in this era might have referred to his conversion in any of the following ways (making allowances for some 20th century jargon), to take just a few:

- I was converted.
- I was saved.
- I became a Christian.
- I prayed the prayer.
- I was born again by the Spirit of God.
- I joined The Way.
- I gave my life to Christ.
- I was baptised in the Spirit.
- I came to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.
- I received Jesus as Saviour.
- I was baptised as a Christian.

Any one of these would have been an appropriate and descriptive code-phrase for conversion, but note especially that the last one properly belongs to the list – at least it would have done then, so strong was the link between conversion and baptism. This is all the more the case because of the obvious water/cleansing/burial symbolism in baptism. For example, if my point is valid, then 1 Peter 3:21 which reads “... and this water (the Flood) symbolises baptism that now saves you ...” can be taken simply to mean “... and this water symbolises your repentance and faith in Jesus Christ that now saves you ...” and the ensuing mention of “the pledge of a good conscience towards God” confirms this (NB Moses was saved by repentance and faith too). “Baptism” was an obvious code-word to use because of the symbolic reference to water. If on the other hand “baptism” isn’t used as a code-word here then it would seem rather worryingly to imply baptismal regeneration.

Likewise Colossians 2:12 which reads “... having been buried with him in baptism ...” can be read simply as “... having been buried with him in your conversion ...”, and again “baptism” was an obvious code-word to use because of the symbolism of burial (of the sinful nature). That we are in the realm of picture language is confirmed by v.11, “... not with the circumcision done by the hands of men, but with the circumcision done by Christ”.

Likewise again, Romans 6:3,4 which reads “Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death ...” can be taken simply to read “Or don’t you know that all of us who professed repentance and faith in Jesus Christ did so into his death? In becoming a Christian, therefore, we were buried with him into death ...”. Again “baptism” is the obvious code-word to use because of the symbolism of death, which in v.2 is seen to mean death to sin (as in Colossians 2:12). That the reality being talked about is conversion and not the baptism itself is confirmed by v.5 where the terminology changes from “baptism into” to “united in” (i.e. the reality remains conversion but the illustrative code-word changes).

“baptised into Christ can be read simply as converted to the Christian faith”

Similarly Ephesians 4:5 which reads “One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (context: unity) can be elucidated as “One Lord (Christ), therefore only one version of the Christian faith, and therefore just the one type of Christian conversion” (i.e. repentance and faith in the one Lord Jesus Christ), and also

Galatians 3:27 which reads “baptised into Christ” can be read simply as “converted to the Christian faith”. If it seems to the reader that I am stretching the point about baptism being a code-word, then a quick look at 1 Corinthians 10:2 may help (go on, have a look at it!). There “baptised” *must* be a code-word.

If the reader is now convinced then all the other references to baptism will neatly slot into place in my code-word thesis. Take for example 1 Corinthians 12:13 (context: unity again), where “For we were all baptised by one Spirit into one body” simply means “At our conversion the one Spirit made each one of us part of the one body” (after all, the Spirit is the Spirit of unity). Note that I am taking “baptised” here to refer to water-baptism and once again baptism is a code-word for conversion. Another possibility is that it’s a reference to baptism in the Spirit (see below), but this would scarcely make any difference so long as we identify ‘baptism in the Spirit’ with conversion (and we do).

We might also at this point note the apostle Paul’s minimalist attitude to baptism in 1 Corinthians 1:13-17. Difficult passages like 1 Corinthians 15:29 about baptism for the dead, I will leave as an exercise for the reader!! (For examples of references to baptism which illustrate its assumed-ness and immediate-ness and also in some cases its symbolism of washing or burial or the link between repentance and faith and baptism, see Acts 2:38-41, 8:12f, 8:35-38, 9:17f, 10:47f, 16:32f, 18:8, 22:16. For other possible allusions to baptism see 1 Corinthians 6:11, Hebrews 10:22, Ephesians 5:26 and John 3:5).

Please note: in concluding that the word baptism in all the above texts is being used as a code-word for conversion I am NOT suggesting that baptism as such is or was a nonentity. It was certainly a relevant, important and integral part of the conversion experience in the New Testament, and no doubt was treasured as such (see shortly for an indication of the part baptism did play in conversion). I have already acknowledged that it was assumed to be automatically done. Theologically I am not a baptismal nihilist! Nonetheless, I unashamedly admit that the code-word thesis radically reduces the biblical theology of baptism as a rite *per se*: the texts examined above provide, not a theology of baptism as the external, physical rite, but a theology of the internal spiritual reality – baptism is not synonymous with conversion, but referring to baptism is equivalent to referring to conversion in these texts; that’s the point. And having referred to just about all the NT baptism texts, I trust the reader will be persuaded by now that the predominant connection in these texts is to the wonder of Christian conversion and the cleansing from the defilement of sin that accrues from it.

**“the texts provide
not a theology of baptism as the external, physical rite
but a theology of the internal spiritual reality –
baptism is not synonymous with conversion, but
referring to baptism is equivalent to referring to conversion”**

As an aside, can we note at this point that there are other references to baptism which are about something entirely(?) different. There is the matter of baptism in/with/by the Holy Spirit which is a figurative baptism (though a real work) done by Christ/the Holy Spirit within the believer at conversion. Also there is Jesus’ “baptism to undergo” in Luke 12:50 which is usually taken to refer to his crucifixion, and which has given us our concept of a ‘baptism of fire’ meaning a severe ordeal (but note, I am not so sure – there is a case for supposing that the “baptism” in v.50, parallel to “fire” in v.49, is the baptism of his judgement on the world – but that’s another debate); and the linguistically similar “baptism I am baptised with” in Mark 10:38-39. Also, there is the 1 Corinthians 10:2 already alluded to.

“baptism has a relatively high profile in the New Testament, not because of an inherently sacramentalist, doctrinally maximalist baptismal theology, but simply because it happened”

What I have established of importance about baptism so far (apart from baptism being a cleansing rite, not a ‘covenant sealing’ rite or ‘public profession of faith’ rite) is that all early conversions were radical (i.e. from established non-Christian-ness) and costly and public and were automatically and immediately accompanied by the demonstrative sign of baptism. In the New Testament, radical conversion and Christian water-baptism were inextricably linked, so much so that the term ‘baptism’ is regularly used throughout the New Testament as a code-word for conversion. There is no suggestion anywhere in the New Testament (that I can find) that the situation was ever otherwise. Baptism has a relatively high profile in the New Testament (in Acts predominantly), not because of an inherently sacramentalist, doctrinally maximalist baptismal theology as such (there isn’t one), but simply because it happened. And it happened, again not because of a high theology, but because by way of being an illustrative and demonstrative act it was the obvious and natural continuation of its antecedents.

**“baptism is the convert saying, ‘I am converting’
... an acted out prayer
... a ‘wet prayer’!”**

In the New Testament baptism is a conversion (repentance) issue celebrating the cleansing from sin’s defilement. Indeed, it could be argued that it’s an integral part of the conversion, an acted out prayer (or a ‘wet prayer’, as I have heard it described!). So more precisely we should say that baptism is a conversion-event issue. Baptism is the convert saying, “I am converting”. It does not say, “I am converted” or “I was converted”. It certainly doesn’t say (on another’s behalf), “We hope for a conversion one day”! And it certainly doesn’t say, “I was converted once before, but I’m clearer about it now and mean it better and so it’s for real this time”. No, baptism simply says, “I am converting”, and is made by the convert to the convert himself and to God, and perhaps to those who led the convert to Christ, who were present when the convert was evangelised and who were instrumental in the conversion. Never is the presence of other witnesses or sponsors or church members a requirement for a valid baptism, still less for a valid conversion.

Now comes the crunch. The immediate water-baptism of new converts is virtually never practised in the Christian church in the West today. It is almost entirely the case that water-baptism is separated from conversion by a long distance in time – a very long time before in the case of infant-baptism and considerably afterwards in the case of believer-baptism. In other words Christian water-baptism as understood and practised in the New Testament is a far, far cry from the baptism of infants as practised by infant-baptists. And it is also a far, far cry from the baptism of believers as practised by believer-baptists, at least in most instances.

**“the waters have been muddied far too much
by centuries of non-biblical baptismal practice”**

The inextricable link mentioned in the previous paragraphs between conversion and baptism has been well and truly severed. Recalling my list of possible ways of referring to ones conversion event, they all still stand in practice these days with the notable exception of the last one. No longer can baptism be used as a code-word, not even for a person who is radically converted and

immediately baptised; it would not be a clear reference to his conversion event because so many baptisms in general denote something entirely different or nothing at all. The occasional baptism that follows the biblical pattern will be lost in the general confusion of those that don't. The waters have been muddied far too much by centuries of non-biblical baptismal practice.

The question I want to ask in the circumstances of our current muddle is, "Do we really need to do these baptisms at all?" Given that biblical baptisms exceedingly rarely happen today, let's abandon the practice altogether, or almost so. What I suggest is this: that we reserve water-baptism, if at all, for the relatively few instances where a person is radically converted from a settled non-Christian life. On this view, for example, we might baptise a Sikh who becomes a Christian; or an international terrorist who becomes a Christian; or the son or daughter of Christian parents who has grown up into adulthood and rejected the parents' Christian faith and has settled him or herself into non-Christian adulthood apart from the parents, but who subsequently becomes a Christian; or we might (but only might: note the child protection implications) baptise a minor from a non-Christian home whose family has nothing to do with Christian things but who makes a decisive step of Christian commitment.

"never mind if new converts show no joy, understanding or assurance, and never mind if they seem likely prospects for lapsing at the first hurdle – dunk them then and there!"

Furthermore, baptism, to follow the biblical pattern, should be immediate, following on conversion, even if there are no or few other Christians present, as in the New Testament. We should, I submit, abandon the well-established practice of preparing people for baptism and anxiously and obsessively catechising them before and at their baptism. And we certainly shouldn't make it a church/denominational membership issue. We should also, I submit, abandon the well-established practice of waiting ages to check there's going to be no lapsing. The practice of delaying is, I suggest, built upon an over-theologised and over-exalted view of baptism. Never mind if new converts show no joy, understanding or assurance, and never mind if they seem likely prospects for lapsing at the first hurdle – dunk them then and there!

And if for such a convert as in the paragraph above, baptism is omitted, forgotten or delayed, what then? Forget it, I say, it doesn't matter. Baptism (such remnant as my view allows to remain) is an initiatory symbolic cleansing rite. Once a convert is established in Christian discipleship and is well settled into the life of a local church then there is no initiating to be done. A delayed baptism would achieve very little. Note that I do not seek to invalidate the place of public declaration of Christian faith – there is certainly a place for giving established Christians the opportunity publicly to testify to their Christian faith or to recommit themselves (call it confirmation, testimony, rededication or whatever) – it's just that baptism isn't the appropriate vehicle for this.

And all other Christians? What about people who are born into an established Christian family and who are brought up to know and love and follow and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and who never reject the faith of their parents, who perhaps cannot even identify a moment at which they were converted? I suggest that we do not baptise them at all. Not as babies, not as infants, not as children, not as teenagers, nor even as adults. What!?, do I hear the reader gasp? Not at all? Indeed. On the view propounded in this paper, Christian water-baptism is the natural, automatic and immediate adjunct to a radical conversion from established non-Christian-ness, and this simply does not apply to the Christian who has been brought up in a Christian home and never known what established non-Christian-ness is in his or her life.

“What!? Not at all?”

Why should we need to baptise such folk anyway? Their Christian-ness is already very well established. In the New Testament the act of baptism demonstrates the convert’s conversion (at least to the convert himself!), and the fact of baptism having been done establishes publicly the Christian-ness of the convert and identifies him or her with the body of Christian believers. But the typical person we are considering in this and the previous paragraph is already identified with the Christian church. In being born into a Christian family, they are born into the Christian church; they have never not been in it, and it’s ludicrous to imagine that baptism (whenever) is the moment they enter the church or is the appropriate moment to ‘welcome’ them into the church. They are brought along to church from the word go and no-one either inside or outside is in any doubt about the essential Christian-ness of this person. Or to put it another way, they have already been ‘initiated’ into the Christian church simply by being born into a Christian family.

And note (oh joy!) this thesis removes the sting from the 20-century-old baptism debate which has split the Christian church. And all the pastoral problems associated with both dominant traditional viewpoints are neatly eradicated. If only we could implement this new thesis (baptise Christians the moment they are converted) then never again will an Anglican church have to lose sleep over its baptism policy; never again will a Christian joining a believer-baptist church feel under such great pressure to be (re-)baptised simply in order to belong; never again will Christian parents in an infant-baptist church feel under the pressure that so often emanates from their parents, friends and other church members, namely the pressure of “Come on, when are you getting it done?”; and never again will the teenage child of Baptist Christians feel the terrible pressure that so often emanates from their parents or other adult church members, namely “Come on, when are you going to be baptised? Have you made your Decision yet? When are you going to ‘Pray the Prayer’?”

There is a further pastoral happiness accruing to any individual member of an infant-baptist denomination who personally comes to this point of view, particularly for any who have hitherto been nervous about the current stance of their denomination. That is to say, even if what we are officially expected to believe and do, and what others in our denomination are actually happy to believe and do, isn’t in our opinion right, it no longer actually matters very much. Now that we’ve downgraded the doctrinal status of baptism altogether we needn’t be over-fussed if we do see children of total non-Christians being baptised – or children at all, for that matter! After all, we don’t any longer actually think we’re doing anything particularly significant, do we? Baptism is much of a muchness now. It remains a pity that we don’t reserve baptism for those (few) instances when it is appropriate and does mean something (particularly for the radically converted new convert), but that’s all – just a pity. What is an intense pity – a pastoral horror, indeed – is that non-Christian parents and others, aided and abetted by the church, make insincere (or at best clueless) declarations of non-existent Christian faith.

“unabashed doctrinal minimalism”

It will be entirely obvious to the reader that the view proposed in this paper is unabashed doctrinal minimalism. Here we have low-octane baptismal theology. I am proposing that we abandon the highly exalted view of baptism which places it upon an essentially non-biblical sacramental pedestal (of whatever stripe). At the end of the day baptism is useful where it’s appropriate, and appropriate where it’s useful, but is really no big deal. The various Big Deal theologies over-exalt baptism. I have argued that the prominent reality should always be the radical conversion, with the baptism if ever appropriate as its mere though not irrelevant adjunct (in contrast to infant- and

believer-baptism in at least most of their manifestations where the baptism seems the important reality, with the conversion a mere adjunct if it happens at all).

I'm fully aware of the implications of this thesis. Now that baptism is spelt with its non-sacramentalist lower case 'b' other side issues cease to matter. Because the theological status of baptism has been downgraded, and it has become a pity (but no more than that) that baptism isn't reserved as the immediate adjunct to conversion, it now becomes illegitimate to hold strong opinions on such matters as re-baptism or private infant baptisms, and if we're trapped in non-biblical baptismal practice I suggest we now tackle those issues pastorally rather than theologically (e.g. Is a family that asks for a private baptism, rather than a baptism within the context of the main Sunday service, avoiding the implication of the Christian faith for church membership? Or is a would-be re-baptism candidate, or in the sprinkling/immersion debate is a would-be immersion candidate, simply seeking a nice, self-indulgent person-centred experience?) Another obvious pastoral implication of this new thesis, of course, is that it has absolutely nil chance of being accepted. Aah well, nice dream while it lasted! Sacramentalists, you may breathe again.

**“what Jesus Christ is instituting here is surely not
the sacrament of baptism,
but the gospel age of gospel preaching,
converting, discipling, living and growing”**

And Matthew 28:19, the supposed proof-text for the sacrament-hood of baptism? Well, if my thesis is correct that references to Christian baptism in the New Testament apply the term as a code-word for radical conversion from established non-Christian-ness, then Matthew 28:19 need be no exception. The command of Jesus is simply this, “Go and proclaim the full Trinitarian gospel everywhere you go, see people converted by it, and grow them up in the Christian faith by the Word of God”. Yet once again baptism is not the dominant reality, but is the code-word to describe the typical conversion which is going to happen in countless thousands in the post-Pentecost Christian age which is about to dawn. What Jesus Christ is instituting here is surely not the sacrament of baptism, but the gospel age of gospel preaching, converting, discipling, living and growing.

---ooOOOoo---