

# The Modern Debate About Normative Infant Baptism: A Discussion and Bibliography

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## Part One: The Historical Background



During the middle of the twentieth century, the practice of infant baptism became the subject of debate in traditionally paedobaptist churches in a manner unparalleled since the time of the Reformation. This discussion began within the ranks of European Continental mainline Protestant Churches, but was repeated and re-echoed in two churches in the United Kingdom (the Church of England and the Church of Scotland) and later in (mostly American) Roman Catholic circles. The following is a summary of the history of the debate as well as a bibliography of the most important sources.

Five factors provide the background to the rise of this discussion:

1) *The position of the modern church over against a post-Constantinian culture:* The disparity in modern Western cultures between the large numbers of infants who are habitually baptized and the much smaller number of adults who grow up to become self-identified practicing Christians led to concerns about the relationship between baptism and discipleship. On the continent, this was expressed in terms of a concern about an “enculturated” Constantinian Christianity.

In England, the concern was expressed more in terms of the problem of "indiscriminate" baptism.

2) *The collapse of the Augustinian doctrine of "original guilt"*: A doctrine of "original guilt" needs to be distinguished from the doctrine of "original sin." Though the theologians involved in the discussion about infant baptism generally would have endorsed the notion of an inherent "sinfulness" or proclivity toward sin present even in infants—this was certainly a major theme in the Neo-Orthodox revival of Reformation theology—they roundly rejected the notion that infants would have personal guilt for such an inherited sinfulness, that original sin entailed a personal or corporate guilt present from birth, or that baptism is necessary to wash away the *guilt* of original sin.

3) *The "Biblical Theology" Movement*: The concern for a recovery of biblically-based theology that accompanied the rise of Neo-Orthodoxy had its effect in the demand for a biblically-centered doctrine of baptism.

4) *The ecumenical movement*: Greater communication between different confessional traditions and concern for church unity resulted in reconsideration of previous disagreements, as well as an echoing of the same theological concerns from one confession to another. Thus, concerns about infant baptism spread historically from continental Protestants to English-speaking Anglicans (and Protestants) to (predominantly American) Roman Catholics.

5) *The Liturgical Renewal Movement*: Liturgical renewal led to a revival of liturgical theology, as well as revised rites of initiation, particularly rites of adult initiation. The revised rites and the theological discussion were mutually influential.

# The Debate in Continental Protestantism

Two books anticipated later developments within Continental Protestantism. In the nineteenth-century, Soren Kierkegaard's *Attack upon Christendom* was an isolated voice decrying a Christendom that had produced a society of nominal but non-practicing Christians. Kierkegaard argued that "one cannot become a Christian as a child"; Within Christendom, he complained, each individual is not willing to become a Christian him or herself, but instead begets children who it is hoped will become Christians. The children repeat the process.<sup>1</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *The Cost of Discipleship* raised the same questions within the context of the German *Volkskirche*. "Cheap grace" meant the "justification of sin without the justification of the sinner." Bonhoeffer complained that "we gave away the word and sacraments wholesale, we baptized, confirmed, and absolved a whole nation unasked and without conditions. . . . Was there ever a more terrible or disastrous instance of the Christianizing of the world than this?"<sup>2</sup>

The background for the Continental discussion found its setting within the context of the question of the German "Confessing Church" over against the *Volkskirche* of Nazi Germany. The first book specifically to address the practice of infant baptism as such within this context was Emil Brunner's *Truth as Encounter*, published in 1937. On grounds of a theo-philosophical personalism, Brunner provided a critique of infant baptism as a Constantinian objectivism.<sup>3</sup>

Brunner's book was followed by Karl Barth's *Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* (1943), a vigorous attack on infant baptism on the basis of the claim that baptism demands a cognitional act of faith of which infants are incapable, and that the universal practice of infant baptism led inevitably to the *Volkskirche*. Barth later followed up his 1943 book with

a more thorough theological discussion of infant baptism in a “fragment” of the unfinished *Church Dogmatics 4/4: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*.<sup>4</sup>

Barth’s son, the New Testament scholar, Marcus Barth, joined forces with his father by publishing *Die Taufe ein Sakrament?* (1951), a rejection of sacramental understandings of baptism.<sup>5</sup>

The continental critique of infant baptism met strong opposition, first by the biblical scholar Oscar Cullmann, whose *Baptism in the New Testament* is considered the fundamental refutation of Barth from a Protestant point of view. The later Church of Scotland Commission on Baptism headed by T.F. Torrance endorsed Cullmann’s position. The biblical scholars Kurt Aland and Joachim Jeremias picked up the debate, with Aland arguing that there was no practice of infant baptism in the New Testament, and Jeremias insisting that there was.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Church of England**

Although similar in some ways to the debate on the continent, the discussion about infant baptism in the Church of England raised additional questions as well. The immediate concern in the C of E was the widespread practice of indiscriminate baptism within the context of a state church. That baptism of infants was expected, even demanded, by the parents of children who themselves were not practicing communicants in the C of E and had no intention of raising their children as Anglicans, coupled with widespread ignorance of Christian doctrine and life and an almost magical view of sacramental efficacy, led to concerns about the rectification of an obvious abuse.

In addition to the concern about indiscriminate baptism, a revival of biblical studies parallel to that on the continent introduced a reconsideration of the *theology* of baptism. That

the theology of baptism in the New Testament presumes that the baptized are adult converts was seen as more important than the question of whether infants were actually baptized.<sup>7</sup>

The third and fourth factors in the Anglican debate reflected the liturgical character of Anglican worship and theology, specifically, the reconsideration of the meaning of confirmation in light of its historic temporal separation from baptism in the Western church, and, finally, the participation of Anglicans in the Liturgical Movement of the mid-twentieth century, and more specifically, the liturgical renewal of baptismal theology and rites in light of all of the above factors.

## **Roman Catholicism**

The normativity of tradition, and specifically of the traditional Augustinian doctrine of original sin, guaranteed universal Roman Catholic acceptance of infant baptism for most of the twentieth century. Catholics perceived infant baptism to be a problem only for Protestants. The primary factors that brought about reconsideration included, first, the same concerns as those raised in the Church of England discussions: indiscriminate baptism, biblical studies, and liturgical questions about confirmation. Two additional factors entered the Roman Catholic discussion, however: first, the Vatican II definition of the Church as the "people of God," and, second, the new adult baptismal rite that was occasioned by the Council (the Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults [RCIA]), along with the restoration of an adult catechumenate.

The first stage in the Roman Catholic discussion began in France in the late 1950's and early 1960's with concerns about indiscriminate baptism. The American discussion began in the early 70's and lasted through the early 80's. In his article, "The Postconciliar Infant Baptism Debate in the American Catholic Church," Paul Covino listed four schools of then

contemporary Catholic thought on the subject of infant baptism: a) Mature Adulthood; b) Environmentalist; c) Initiation Unity (unification of confirmation and baptism); d) Corresponding practice (pragmatic—whatever works). The Vatican Doctrinal Congregation's, "Instruction on Infant Baptism" (1980), a complete repudiation of the American discussion in favor of the traditional Augustinian model effectively ended Roman Catholic discussion about infant baptism.<sup>8</sup>

## **Part Two: Theological Issues**

### **Biblical Concerns**

Having traced the history of the modern debate about infant baptism within the paedobaptist churches, we now turn to the theological issues involved. Since the renewed emphasis on biblical studies associated with the "biblical theology" movement provided much of the incentive for the modern debate, we provide a short summary of the scriptural context in which the debate occurred.

First to be noted is the lack of direct references in the New Testament itself to the practice of infant baptism. The first direct reference to the practice of infant baptism in the early church is in Tertullian. There are however possible indirect references. A handful of biblical texts have provided the central fodder for discussion since the debates of the sixteenth century, and these texts resurfaced in the modern discussion.<sup>9</sup>

a) The mention of "house-hold" baptism (Acts 10:44-48, 16:15, 33) has led to suggestions that infants would have been baptized in the early church.

b) Jesus' blessing of little children (Mt 19:13-15, Mk 10:13-16, Lk 18:15-17) is viewed as a possible indirect reference to or a mandate for infant baptism.<sup>10</sup>

c) The connection drawn by Paul between baptism and circumcision (Col. 2:11, 12) has led to the suggestion that, just as Jewish (male) infants were circumcised, Christian infants (of either gender) certainly would have been baptized.

In addition to the New Testament references, the practice of Jewish proselyte baptism in the first century has been examined for possible warrant for infant baptism.

Four positions on the relation between infant baptism in the New Testament and current practice are possible, and all four were embraced by various parties in the modern debate.

a) The actual practice of infant baptism during the New Testament period and the period of the early church equals normative practice of infant baptism today (O. Cullmann, J. Jeremias, the Church of Scotland Commission).

b) No practice of infant baptism during the New Testament period and the period of the early church equals practice of adult (believer) baptism today (Karl and Marcus Barth, Baptists).

c) No practice of infant baptism during the New Testament period and the period of the early church nonetheless allows for infant baptism today (K. Aland, G. Dix, O. Quick).

d) Normative practice of adult baptism (and possible practice of infant baptism) during the New Testament period and the period of the early church equals normative adult baptism today (G. Wainwright, N. Cryer, Anglican Special Commissions).

## **Models of Baptism**

A study of the literature produced by the protagonists of the infant baptism debate leads to the conclusion that, although issues of ecclesiastical tradition and biblical warrant must be considered in the debate, a more fundamental factor determining one's final stance on the question of whether

infants should be baptized is one's theology of baptism. The problem of the theology of infant baptism is essentially a problem of integrating one's understanding of the biblical references (and more importantly the theology of baptism one discerns in the New Testament) and one's assessment of the traditional practices of the churches with an overarching understanding of the meaning of baptism. This is not to imply that Scripture and tradition are subordinate to theology, but that, since the biblical argument about infant baptism is necessarily an argument from silence, even to make sense of the biblical and historical issues necessitates the adoption and weighing of interpretive theological paradigms within which one evaluates the biblical and historical materials. Certainly such paradigms ought to be subject to correction in light of inconsistencies and tensions that arise from interaction with the normative sources of Scripture and tradition, but a theology of infant or adult baptism cannot be arrived at from a simple straightforward reading of Scripture and/or tradition.

The examination of the mid-twentieth century discussion suggests that one's fundamental paradigm or model of baptism will be determined by one's answer to the following four sets of questions:

1) What is baptism? Is it a divine act (a sacrament) or a human act? How does baptism fit into the biblical story? What does it say about Christ? About grace, redemption, and discipleship? About the Church?

2) What is the relation between baptism and faith?

3) What is the relation between baptism and the Christian community? Is the primary orientation of the act of baptism toward the individual being baptized or toward the community of the Church?

4) What is the stance of the Church toward the surrounding

culture? What place does baptism play in articulating that stance?

In my reading of the modern discussion, I have discerned six basic paradigms or models of baptism, each reflecting different answers to the four fundamental sets of questions: three advocating normative infant baptism and three advocating normative adult initiation. In what follows, I will identify the six positions, summarize the answers each gives to the four fundamental sets of questions, and provide a brief assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of each one.

## **Models of Normative Infant Baptism**

The following three models are characterized by the assumption that infant baptism is not only permitted, but that it is justifiably the normative model of baptism.

*1) The Augustinian Model—Baptism as Cleansing from Original Sin* (Vatican Doctrinal Congregation).

1) Baptism, “which is necessary for salvation, is the sign and means of God’s prevenient love which frees us from original sin.”<sup>11</sup> Infant baptism rests on apostolic tradition.

2) Baptism is never administered without faith. In the case of infants, it is the faith of the Church.

3) The orientation of baptism is primarily individualist. Baptism is the only means to ensure a child’s entry into eternal happiness; for this reason, children must not be deprived of baptism. On a corporate level, it is important to avoid scandalizing the faithful—by not baptizing infants.

4) On the relation between Church and culture, there is a concern for Christian upbringing, but any assurance of such is sufficient. Preoccupation with numbers is not a temptation, but a blessing—the Church cannot fail to give to everyone possible the sacrament of baptism. Concerns about modern

pluralism cannot be normative in assessing whether infants should be baptized. Such sociological criteria would have paralyzed the early Christian missionary expansion of the Church.

### *Evaluation*

It should be noted that this is the official model endorsed by the Vatican in response to the opening of questions about infant baptism by Roman Catholic theologians, and, as such, is simply a complete rejection of the modern discussion and a re-endorsement of an earlier position. It does not so much address the issues raised in the modern debate as treat them as dangerous temptations to be avoided. On a positive level, the Vatican's statement does take steps to preserve the institutional practice, as well as to emphasize the necessity of prevenient grace for salvation. It also takes seriously the problem of inherent human sinfulness. On the other hand, it is questionable whether a doctrine of "original guilt" is theologically tenable, as well as whether such a doctrine should provide the primary grounds for a theology of baptism. As the late Roman Catholic liturgical theologian Mark Searle pointed out during the Catholic discussions about infant baptism, the traditional Augustinian model portrays a normative theology of infant baptism as an emergency measure. Baptism is necessary primarily to assure the future salvation of infants in danger of death—hardly an adequate theology of baptism. Moreover, rather than addressing the problem of indiscriminate baptism, the Vatican statement encourages the practice.

*II) The Reformed Model—Baptism as Sign of the Covenant* (O. Cullmann, Church of Scotland Commission on Baptism, E. Schlink<sup>12</sup>)

1) Baptism is the sign of our sharing in the one baptism of Christ which he underwent once for all and one for all on the Cross.

2) In baptism, we are passive. Baptism does not depend on the faith of the baptized; that would be "salvation by works." Rather, baptism produces faith. The only faith that matters is the faith that follows baptism. The baptized share in the faith of Christ. (There is a suggestion of the possibility of implicit faith in infants).

3) The orientation of baptism is primarily corporate. The New Testament takes it for granted that infants are to be included in the new covenant as they were in the old. Infant baptism corresponds to infant circumcision. The only condition for baptism into the covenant community is natural birth to parents who are members of the Church.

4) As to the question of the relation between Church and culture, the question of baptism is foreign to and must not be confused with the question of a national or state church.

### *Evaluation*

Positively, this model adopts a biblically-based and communally-oriented theology of baptism. Baptism grows out of the biblical notion of covenant, and is the incorporation of the baptized into the community of the covenant. Negatively, the biblical exegesis behind the position can be questioned as too easily conflating the Old and New Testament notions of covenant. In the Old Testament, the covenant community is national. In the New, it is not. In addition, the equation of faith with passivity is questionable. The New Testament understanding of faith demands more than passivity. By stressing that infant baptism is normative rather than merely permissible, this position implicitly raises questions about the baptism practiced by the apostles. Since, in this model, it is the faith of Christ that is important, as well as the faith that follows baptism, there is little incentive to avoid indiscriminate baptism. (Interestingly, the model would seem to preclude the baptism of dying infants, since there would be little possibility of faith following their baptism).

*III) The Environmentalist Model—Baptism as Community Nurture* (WCC document “Baptism, Eucharist, Ministry” (to some extent); Roman Catholic liturgical theologians Edward Kilmartin, Mark Searle)

1) Baptism is both a sign of prevenient grace as well as the experience of birth into the redeeming and hope-growing community of the Church.

2) Faith is primarily the faith of the sponsors and the community, which nurtures the individual in Christian preparation for a later adult faith commitment. The individual faith of the baptized is viewed primarily as a process of growth toward maturity.

3) The orientation of baptism is clearly corporate. Baptism equals initiation into the community, which is the Body of Christ, the people of God.

4) The relation between the Church and culture is ambiguous—all the way from discriminate infant baptism on the one hand to the claim that Christian bodies have no pretensions to limit the Church to a converted membership. Rather, inclusiveness demands that the whole society be brought into the sphere of salvation.

### *Evaluation*

This model of infant baptism seems currently to be the predominant model among most main-line and Liberal Protestants. On a positive level, this model provides an emphasis on community, nurture, pilgrimage, and a theology of the Christian child that is perhaps neglected in other models. The model also provides a warrant for the traditional practice of infant baptism that is rooted in biblical images of sanctification, Christian growth, incorporation into the Christian community. Negatively, it is questionable whether this model of Christian initiation is not based more on sociological patterns of initiation than a biblical theology

of baptism.<sup>13</sup> The biblical and liturgical imagery that associates baptism with following Christ and renouncing the works of Satan and desires that separate one from God, with death and resurrection, forgiveness of sin, turning from darkness to light, leaving one way of life for another, is at least secondary, if not overlooked completely. The model is not sufficiently grounded in an adequate *theology* of baptism. Rather, what is normative is a pre-existing practice which is then justified after the fact (Daniel Stevick).

## **Models of Normative Adult Initiation**

The three models of baptism discussed above all presume not only that infant baptism is permissible, but that it is more or less the normative model for baptism. The following three models of baptism do not necessarily presume that adult baptism should be the normative or exclusive model of Christian initiation, but do presume that adult initiation (whether baptism or confirmation) should be the normative Christian model.

### *IV) Infant baptism as incomplete Initiation—Normative Adult Confirmation* (Gregory Dix, Oliver Quick, C.F.D. Moule)

1) A theology and practice of adult baptism is normative in the New Testament. Accordingly, the danger of transferring the full significance of adult baptism to infant baptism must be avoided. Rather, Christian initiation should be viewed as a process beginning in infancy and culminating with an adult affirmation of baptismal faith. Infant baptism with adult confirmation should be seen as a single initiation rite, taking place over a period of time. The notions of “regeneration” and “rebirth” should be applied to this entire process of conversion, not to the practice of infant baptism alone, and, accordingly, the symbolic element must be emphasized over the sacramental in the practice of infant baptism. It is the entire process of conversion, beginning

with baptism and culminating in mature confirmation that is sacramentally effective.

2) An adult affirmation of faith takes place at confirmation when one claims one's baptism as one's own.

3) The orientation of baptism is that of a "biblical corporatism." The community emphasis of the New Testament is post-individualist, not pre-individualist. Christian initiation is the incorporation of the individual into the community of the Church without suppressing his or her identity.

4) Over against a cultural Christianity, the practice of indiscriminate baptism is criticized, and mature confirmation is stressed.

### *Evaluation*

On a positive level, this model takes discipleship seriously. It resolves the tension between individuality and community by stressing the incorporation of the individual into the community. It helpfully balances the divine (sacramental) nature of the process of Christian initiation with the necessity of a mature human response of faith. Over against the practice of indiscriminate baptism, it emphasizes that baptism is the beginning of a process of discipleship.

Negatively, this model's greatest weakness lies in its application to the rite of confirmation that which the New Testament applies to the sacrament of baptism. Moreover, the model makes normative the historically accidental separation between baptism and confirmation that took place in the Western Medieval church. On the other hand, given the practice of infant baptism, to rejoin baptism and confirmation (temporally) in a single rite of infant initiation would be to ignore the need for a mature adult expression of faith.

V) *Baptism as Discipleship—Exclusive Adult Baptism* (Karl and

Marcus Barth, Baptists)

1) Adult baptism is the baptism of the New Testament. Baptism with water (not to be confused with Spirit baptism) is the confession of faith, obedience and hope, the first step of faithfulness to God, undertaken by a voluntary request by the baptized to the Christian community in which one is baptized. Water baptism is not a sacrament, but a human act of obedience. Baptism in the Spirit is the divine prevenient act of grace and regeneration by which one is made a Christian.

2) Baptism is the sign of faith, which precedes it, and asks for it. Baptism is believer baptism, and the Church is composed of baptized believers.

3) Through baptism, one stands in a personal relation to the Head of the Christian community, Jesus Christ.

4) At the level of the relation between Church and culture, there is a strong rejection of the notion of a state church. The state church stands and falls with infant baptism.

### *Evaluation*

The model of believer baptism takes seriously the New Testament emphasis on discipleship and conversion associated with baptism. Moreover, it follows the New Testament order of repentance, faith, confession, baptism. There is also a strong emphasis on a biblical individualism, the demand that each Christian has a responsibility to undertake discipleship as a personal response to divine grace.

Negatively, we might ask whether baptism in the New Testament is merely a symbol, and whether the radical distinction between water baptism and Spirit baptism that is essential to this model can be maintained exegetically and theologically. In addition, the practice of believer baptism does not necessarily lead to the elimination of the baptismal abuses associated with infant baptism. The indiscriminate practice of

child baptism in many Baptist churches has no obvious advantages over the indiscriminate practice of infant baptism. In addition, an over-emphasis on the subjective side of the act of conversion can lead to an undervaluing of the objective nature of the act of baptism as a once-for-all unrepeatable act of Christian initiation. The occasional practice (in Baptist churches) of re-baptism even of those already once baptized on profession of faith—in light of later concerns about the authenticity of a conversion experience—points to subjectivism. Moreover, the uncritical embrace of “civil religion” by some Baptist groups who (for the last few decades) have continued to call for a return to a “Christian America,” demonstrates that even the practice of believer baptism cannot wholly eliminate the temptation toward the establishment of a state church. Some, at least, of those who were most deeply involved in this movement have now come to realize that the marriage between Evangelical religion and a particular political agenda is a form of idolatry.

*VI) Baptism as Sacrament of Faith—Normative Adult Baptism* (Church of England Theological Commissions, “Sacramental” British Baptists, Geoffrey Wainright)

1) Baptism is a sacrament (G. R. Beasley-Murray) that effects what it symbolizes (Neville Clark). It is the focus of a creative act of God whereby a person is made one with Christ in his death and resurrection, cleansed from sin, incorporated into the Church (which is Christ’s body), and sealed with the Holy Spirit. There is no distinction between water baptism and Spirit baptism (C of E Commission on Initiation).

2) Adult baptism is normative. In the New Testament, the role of personal response is conspicuous and inseparable from faith. The New Testament assumes that one cannot receive baptism without a lively faith and renunciation of the world. Infant baptism cannot bear the weight of adult baptism.

3) There is a heavy emphasis on the community of discipleship

to which one is admitted in baptism. The community provides support and nurture for the baptized.

4) The emphasis on the normativity of adult baptism leads to a strong rejection of the practice of indiscriminate baptism. Either there should be no infant baptism with a rite of infant dedication (Neville Cryer) or infant baptism should be practiced discriminately with a later deliberate and public confession of adherence to Christ. It is emphasized that infant baptism is not necessary for salvation or the well-being of the Church. The attitude toward indiscriminate baptism is well-expressed in the words of C. Pocknee:

*The idea that the Church of England, by law established, whatever that means, shall continue to throw a veneer of religiosity over the nation by baptizing, marrying and burying everyone is to reduce Christianity to an absurdity. Primarily Christianity is what God has done for man in Jesus Christ by his incarnation, Cross and Resurrection, and it is the task of the church to insist that all baptized persons accept these truths as fundamental to the whole of life. Indiscriminate baptism acts as a cloud or blanket between the claims of God in Jesus Christ on the one hand, and the human race on the other. . . Let the Church be the Church.*

### *Evaluation*

On a positive level, this model attempts to be faithful to scriptural, theological, sacramental and liturgical concerns. There is a heavy emphasis on Christian discipleship and a strong critique of enculturated Christianity. There is a theology of the Christian child as having a “provisional” place in the Church (Wainwright).

Negatively, this model will no doubt appear as a “compromise” position to those embracing different models of baptism. It affirms simultaneously the normativity of adult baptism and

the sacramental nature of baptism.<sup>14</sup> At the same time that it upholds the normativity of adult baptism and is critical of the practice of indiscriminate infant baptism, it does not renounce the practice of infant baptism (except for its Baptist articulators). How is the practice of infant baptism and the theory of normative adult baptism held together? Moreover, for the traditional members of the (Anglican and Baptist) churches to which its adherents belong, this model appears to be a challenge (indeed a criticism) of practices and theologies that are perceived to be at the heart of what their churches are about.

## **Conclusion**

The above summary of the six models of baptism that appeared in the modern infant baptism debate might lead the reader to the conclusion that choosing between them is an arbitrary matter, and that the question of infant baptism is an insuperable one. Certainly four of the models seem to cancel each other out.

As one examines the models, one discerns a pattern to the answers they provide to the four questions raised above. The pattern can be illustrated by imagining two axes, pointing to four different areas of emphasis. Let the first axis be a vertical one, with the two extremes representing the question of whether baptism is primarily a divine act, or a human act. Let the second axis be a horizontal one, with the extremes representing the question of whether baptism is primarily a community act or an individual act.

Let it be granted that each of the six models emphasizes in its own way that baptism is both a divine act and a human act, that baptism concerns both the individual who is baptized and the community into which he or she is admitted at baptism. Let it be granted also that there might be reasons to insist that one or the other of the four concerns should have priority over its opposite member. Nonetheless, each of the six models

lines up in a particular way according to its particular emphases.



Thus, the non-sacramental model of exclusive adult baptism (advocated by Karl Barth and traditional Baptists) provides a thesis to which the Reformed model (baptism as sign of the covenant) is an antithesis.<sup>15</sup> For Barth, water baptism is primarily a human and individual act. At the opposite extreme, the Reformed model perceives baptism to be primarily a divine and corporate act. For Barth, questions of the relation between the Church and the outside world are crucial. For the traditional Reformed, they are irrelevant.

As an exact complement to the Barth/Reformed antithesis is that laid out by the Augustinian and Environmentalist/Community Nurture models. In the Augustinian model, baptism is primarily a divine act oriented primarily toward the salvation of an individual. In the Environmentalist model, baptism is primarily a human act administered by the community. However, where the Barthian/Reformed positions are clearly seen by their advocates to be at odds with each other, it might at first surprise the observer to note that the Augustinian and Community Nurture models are at opposite extremes. Augustinians often complement their individualism with a high ecclesiology. A good many Environmentalists are high sacramentalists. Rather than thesis and antithesis, the Augustinian and Environmental extremes might be seen as complementary opposites, Yin and Yang.

If each of the four axes has its representative model—broadly within the parameters of some broadly accepted Christian tradition—each also has its (il-)logical extreme, the point to which the position leads if not balanced by its opposite pole. Thus, a radicalization of the model of exclusive adult baptism—focusing exclusively on the human and individualist

dimension of the sacraments—leads to practices of re-baptism or Quakerism. An extremist form of the Reformed model leads to the problems encountered by the Puritans of what to do about the children of non-practicing covenant members—the “half-way covenant.” The extreme version of the Augustinian model has led to quasi-magical understandings of the sacraments, the practices of private baptism, and ritualism. Extreme versions of the environmentalist model lead to “Broad Church” notions of Christianity, the “State Church,” and the practice of indiscriminate baptism.

In my opinion, these four models reach insoluble impasses because they are not sufficiently theologically grounded. Baptism must be understood Christologically. Baptism is baptism in the Christian community because it is baptism into Christ.

How to understand baptism? At the heart of baptism is the notion that baptism is union with Christ in his humanity, the humanity that the Word took on in the incarnation. As Paul states in Romans 6, baptism is union with Christ in his crucifixion and resurrection. Through baptism, the Holy Spirit that was poured out upon the incarnate Jesus in his own baptism in the Jordan river is poured out upon us, and through that Spirit we are united to the crucified and risen Christ. Is there any scriptural basis here for a distinction between water and Spirit baptism? Certainly none in the biblical text, and none in the Christian tradition until the sixteenth century. The baptism by which we are baptized into Christ through the Spirit is water baptism.

Baptism is then a divine act, something that God does, a sacrament. Unfortunately, the notion of sacramentality has become distorted in recent years to the simple affirmation that God enjoys things, and wants us to enjoy them too. The difference between Zwinglian and sacramental understandings of salvation concerns not simply whether creation is good, and whether God uses created effects as means of grace (although

this is certainly true), nor whether salvation is an act of re-creation (although this is true as well), but in what sense salvation is an act of re-creation. The key to a proper sacramentality is the role of the humanity of the crucified and risen Christ, and our union with that humanity. This is where Zwingli and Luther divided on the meaning of the Eucharist, and it is where contemporary “free church” Evangelicals and Liberal Protestants on the one hand, and sacramentalists on the other—Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, and Anglicans—divide on baptism. The sacramentalist insists that Paul’s language of union with Christ, of identification with Christ, of baptism as union with Christ in his crucifixion and resurrection, and of the Eucharist and the Church as the body of Christ, is to be taken with the same literal urgency with which the Evangelical embraces Paul’s forensic language about justification.

But what of the role of faith? Does a high view of sacramental efficacy allow us to dismiss the necessity of faith, to characterize faith as “merely passive,” to play off against one another baptism and conversion, as did John Henry Newman, who, in his lectures on justification, contrasted the [correct] (Anglican) Catholic view, which makes baptism the instrument of justification, with the [mistaken] Lutheran view, which makes faith that instrument.<sup>16</sup>

A high sacramental view of baptism forbids such an antithesis because baptism is our unity with the crucified and risen humanity of Christ. It is here that I think the two positions I have denoted Normative Adult Confirmation and Baptism as Sacrament of Faith do indeed make real advances over the other four positions. As the Church of England Theological Commission pointed out, baptism is “the focus of a creative act of God whereby a man [*sic*] is made one with Christ in his death, and resurrection, cleansed from his sin, admitted into the fellowship of the *Ecclesia* which is Christ’s Body, given the adoption of Sonship to the Father, and sealed with the

Holy Spirit unto the day of redemption.” But precisely because baptism has this creative role, it does *not* leave the human being to be passive. Because baptism is an “indivisible whole . . . there can be no separation between union with Christ, membership in his Church, renunciation of the world, and the embracing of Eternal Life.”<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, the crucial point is not whether the New Testament and patristic Church may or may not have baptized infants, but rather that the New Testament and patristic theology of baptism is a theology of adult baptism: “The rites of initiation mark the passage of the convert into this new world. It is assumed in all the New Testament language about the rites that the convert receives them with a lively faith and a renunciation of the old world. . . . In the New Testament Adult Baptism is the norm, and it is only in the light of this fact that the doctrine and practice of Baptism can be understood.”<sup>18</sup> A more crucial concern than whether or not infants are baptized is, then, the theological understanding of the baptism into which both adults and infants are baptized, and whether that understanding is lived out in the Church.

Given this ringing endorsement of a sacramental model of adult initiation, one might ask what effect the endorsement of a model of normative adult initiation has had on the traditionally paedobaptist Anglican churches in which it has been advocated? Was this attempt at baptismal reform a success? An examination of the history of the last thirty years or so (at least in the American Episcopal Church) indicates mixed results.

On a positive note, the model of normative adult baptism has had considerable influence on the liturgical side of Episcopal Church life, as evidenced in the changes in ritual and practice associated with the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. The model for baptism in the new Prayer Book is a model of adult

baptism.<sup>19</sup> This same model is used for both infants and for adults (this, in contrast to the new post-Vatican II Catholic baptismal rites, which contain separate services for infant and adult baptism—for adults, the Rite for Christian Initiation of Adults). When the adult service is used in cases of infant baptism, adult sponsors answer the questions posed to the child on his or her behalf. The sponsors promise to provide the child with a Christian upbringing. Baptism is now a community practice which takes place within the context of Sunday morning worship, eliminating the practice of private baptism, and cutting back considerably on the practice of indiscriminate baptism. Repeated adult affirmation of baptismal faith is written into the rite itself. In addition to the questions posed to the baptized, each baptized member of the community reaffirms his or her own baptismal vows by answering a series of questions that follow a mutual recitation of the Apostle's Creed. The members of the community not only reaffirm their own baptismal faith, but promise to support the newly baptized in his or her own growth in the Christian life. The Catechism in the 1979 BCP also emphasizes a theology of normative adult baptism: "Q. What is required of us at Baptism? A. It is required that we renounce Satan, repent of our sins and accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior."

On the other hand, a cursory examination of contemporary life in the Episcopal Church shows that the model has not created a radical transformation. Rather, the traditional parties of Anglican identity—Anglo-Catholic, Evangelical, and Broad Church/Liberal—have continued to interpret baptism largely in terms of their own respective theologies.

Based on my own experience in the Episcopal Church, I would suggest that the primary result of the reform of baptismal theology in both Anglo-Catholic and Broad Church/Liberal circles has led to an emphasis on the completeness of baptism as the act of sacramental initiation. Thus, Gregory Dix's

notion of mature confirmation as a necessary completion to the act of baptism seems generally to have been abandoned in Anglo-Catholic circles. The Augustinian model of baptism as the necessary removal of "original guilt" is not influential among most Anglo-Catholics, but a radical view of sacramental efficacy is. The result is often an emphasis on the sacramental effectiveness and completeness of (infant) baptism that is deliberately played off against an Evangelical concern for the necessity of conversion. In this view, those who call for conversion simply do not understand the sacramental nature of baptism. In other words, at least some contemporary Anglo-Catholics play off the sacramental emphasis of the new model against its call for normative adult initiation.

In Broad Church/Liberal circles, the sacramental notion of baptism is secondary to the notion of baptism as incorporation into the "inclusive" Christian community. Baptism is no longer seen as the sacramental sign that simultaneously unites all Christians, while distinguishing the Christian community from the outside world. Rather, baptism is viewed as the equivalent of a membership card. Anyone who has been baptized is automatically inside, and the goal of the Christian community is to become as inclusive as possible, to exclude no one. Baptism thus no longer distinguishes the Church from the world outside. Rather, the world outside is perceived to provide an ideological or political agenda to which the Church must march.

If this seems an exaggeration, one need only read the writings of retired Bishop John Shelby Spong, or the polemics about inclusiveness and diversity that have followed the ordination of gay Bishop V. Gene Robinson, as well as the defenses of this action that regularly appeal to the doctrine of baptism. The latest irony in the inclusivist model of baptism is the practice of "open communion"—understood to mean not the mutual sharing in the Eucharist by those of different Christian churches, but the invitation to share in the Eucharist to

those who have never even been baptized as Christians. Thus, an embrace of a model of baptism as a sacrament of inclusion has led to an inclusion that makes baptismal optional. Accordingly, the current Broad Church/Liberal model of the Church tends to be a kind of careless version of the Environmentalist/Community Nurture model of baptism. To use the word "heresy" of this baptismal theology is not too strong.

I would suggest that the most radical change has taken place among Anglican Evangelicals. Earlier Evangelical discussions of baptism in Anglican circles tended to echo the Reformed model of covenant initiation (Geoffrey Bromiley) and to downplay sacramental efficacy (Michael Green). Contemporary Evangelicals seem more open to a high sacramental understanding of both baptism and Eucharist than were their forebears. At the same time, it is largely Evangelicals who have most vigorously resisted the siren call of "inclusion."

There is a drastic need among Anglicans for a radical recovery of the notion of baptism as discipleship. Borrowing from narrative accounts of ecclesiology, I would suggest that baptism should be construed as the boundary line between two communities, each with different stories.<sup>20</sup> When one becomes a member of the Christian community by baptism, one's identity, including one's previous story, has now to be reformed by inclusion into a new story, the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the story of the community composed of disciples of Jesus. The historic connection between baptism and the recitation of the Apostle's Creed points to the confessionally narrative basis of the Christian identity endowed in baptism. Accordingly, a sacramental theology of normative adult initiation calls into question both the party spirit of traditional Anglicanism, as well as the story told by the outside world. The tie that unites the Christian community is the sacrament of baptism, not party-identity. The Catholic community is the community of the

baptized, not the one with the incense.

At the same time, baptism distinguishes between the Church and the non-Christian world as well. The Church's story is not the world's story, and in becoming disciples of Jesus, we have to renounce the world's story. This means that baptism demands conversion. In other words, contrary to Anglo-Catholic polemics against Evangelicals, (infant) baptism is not enough. Contrary to Liberal Protestant claims, baptism means that the goal of the Christian community is not to be inclusive, but to follow Jesus, and the way of Jesus is the narrow way, not the Broad (Church) way.

This leads to my final observation—that the issues that led some members of the Confessing Church to question the practice of indiscriminate baptism over against the cultural Christianity of the *Volkskirche* have not changed, only the setting. The Church still must strive to maintain its identity within the context of a culture that does not share its values, and we do not always do a good job of it. Baptism marks the boundaries because baptism is not only the sacrament of Christian initiation, but also—with the Eucharist—the central symbol of Christian identity. The appropriate summary of Christian baptism is not “getting the baby done,” nor “becoming an inclusive community,” but the recitation of the Apostle's Creed: “I believe . . .”

<[1](#) Soren Kierkegaard, *Attack upon “Christendom,”* trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944, 1968), 213-216.

<[2](#) Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship,* trans. R.H. Fuller (NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1959, 1963), 46, 58.

<[3](#) Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter,* trans. A. Loos & D. Cairns (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

<[4](#) Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism,* trans. E.A. Payne (London: SCM Press, 1948); *Church Dogmatics*

*Vol IV The Doctrine of Reconciliation Part 4 (Fragment)*  
*Baptism as the Foundation of the Christian Life*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1969).

<5 Marcus Barth, *Die Taufe ein Sakrament?* (Zollikon-Zurich, 1951).

<6 Oscar Cullmann. *Baptism in the New Testament*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1950); Church of Scotland, *The Biblical Doctrine of Baptism: A Study Document issued by the Special Commission on Baptism of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1958); Kurt Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* trans. G.R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963); Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, trans. D. Cairns (Philadelphia: Westminster, Press, 1960).

7 "In the New Testament Adult Baptism is the norm, and it is only in the light of this fact that the doctrine and practice of Baptism can be understood." Church of England Liturgical Commission, *Baptism and Confirmation* (London: SPCK, 1959), p.x.

<8 Paul F.X. Covino, "The Postconciliar Infant Baptism Debate in the American Catholic Church," *Worship* 56(3) (May 1982): 240-260; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "The Instruction on Infant Baptism, Oct. 20, 1980," *Origins* 10(30) (Jan. 8, 1981).

<9 The Methodist liturgical theologian Geoffrey Wainwright referred to the modern biblical discussion as "an academic dogfight . . . over the scraps." Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: The Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 501.

10 Anglican bishop and theologian Stephen Sykes provides a contemporary example. He says that "[t]he emotionally powerful image of the child being embraced in the arms of Jesus' mercy

forms the affective heart of [Cranmer's baptismal] liturgy. . . . Cranmer's liturgy . . . was a liturgy proclaiming Christ's reception of little children." Sykes dismisses the dropping of Mark 10 from the baptismal liturgy of the C of E's Alternative Service Book (on the grounds that the passage has nothing whatsoever to do with baptism) as "pedantry of the first order." " 'Baptism doth Represent unto us oure Profession,' " *Unashamed Anglicanism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 11-12.

<[11](#) Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. "The Instruction on Infant Baptism, Oct. 20, 1980," *Origins* 10(30) (Jan. 8, 1981): 478.

[12](#) Although a German Lutheran, Edmund Schlink endorsed a model of normative sacramental infant baptism that is virtually identical to the Reformed model endorsed by the Church of Scotland.

[13](#) A rather blatant example of such a sociological understanding of baptism as "initiation into a community" is Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, *Models of Confirmation and Baptismal Affirmation* (Religious Education Press, 1995). The meaning of baptism is stated baldly: "These liturgies exist to welcome." 199.

[14](#) Lutheran theologian Edmund Schlink, for example, suggested that sacramental Baptist G. R. Beasley-Murray should, in light of his convictions about the sacramental nature of baptism, embrace infant baptism. Edmund Schlink, *The Doctrine of Baptism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1972), 149.

[15](#) Again, the Lutheran Schlink sees the sacramental Lutheran/Reformed model of normative infant baptism (Baptism as Sign of the Covenant) and the non-sacramental believer baptism of Barth as the two exclusive alternatives, 166-171.

[16](#) John Henry Newman, *Lectures on Justification* (London: J. H. Parker, Oxford, 1838), 4-5.

[17](#) Church of England Theological Commission, *The Theology of Christian Initiation* (London: SPCK, 1949), 9.

[18](#) Church of England Liturgical Commission, *Baptism and Confirmation* (London: SPCK, 1959).

[19](#) Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (NY: HarperCollins, 1995), 269.

[20](#) Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

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\*Though part of the United Kingdom, the Church of Scotland Commission so closely follows the Continental Reformed paradigm, that I have included it here.

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