Baptism as a Means of Grace: A Response to John Stott's 'The Evangelical Doctrine of Baptism'

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In word and deed, the rite of baptism succinctly reveals the Christian story biblically, theologically, and doctrinally. Indeed the rite's power and importance are revealed in the manner in which the symbol gives rise to a people formed and transformed through grace. This is why corruption of the rite or its meaning threatens not merely an ancient ritual of the church, but more importantly how Christians understand and live out their faith. Thus, I believe it to be important to respond to John Stott's view of the relationship between baptism and regeneration in his article 'The Evangelical Doctrine of Baptism'.[1] Though sympathetic with Stott's concern to present a biblical doctrine of baptism which treats seriously the relationship between baptism, regeneration and faith, I fear his appeal to 'decision' as instrumental to regeneration distorts a biblical understanding of regeneration and baptism.

Stott's article sets out to 'show that the teaching of *The Book of Common Prayer* and the *Articles of Confession* can and should be interpreted in a way that is fully consistent with biblical doctrine'.[2] The article's opening section, 'The Meaning of Baptism', conforms to a traditional Anglican understanding of baptism. It is Stott's second section, 'The Effect of Baptism', which is most revealing. Whereas up to this point Stott has consistently reaffirmed the Godward side of salvation and regeneration, here he turns to the sacrament's 'actual effect' upon those who receive it. Stott rejects the Roman Catholic *ex opere operato* view which holds that baptism immediately and irrevocably confers salvific grace and regeneration through the sacrament itself independent of any present or future response of the one baptized. Accordingly, the *ex opere operato* view fails because it does not take into account the necessary relationship between regeneration and faith in Scripture. This anomaly has led many, according to Stott, to adopt the *bare token view* of baptism. Here

1 John Stott 'The Evangelical Doctrine of Baptism' in *Churchman* Vol 112/1 1998 pp 47-9
2 John Stott 'Baptism' p 47

the rite is understood as a mere symbol which points to grace but in no way conveys it.[3] This is an impoverished understanding of the rite, according to Stott, in that it neither does justice to the early church emphasis on the effect of the rite nor to the biblical language that unites baptism and salvation.

The inadequacy of both the *ex opere operato* and the *bare token view* creates a doctrinal chasm that must be spanned. On one side of the chasm lie the words and tradition of the rite that suggest actual regenerative grace conferred, while on the other side lies the evangelical assertion that personal decision and profession of faith are necessary for regeneration. Stott attempts to bridge the gap through appeal to his *Covenant Sign View* of the effect of baptism, which sets out to show the relationship between the covenant, as expressed in the rite of circumcision, and baptism.[4] Accordingly, the first phase of the Abrahamic Covenant is justification by faith through which Abraham was reckoned as righteous 'by faith while he was still uncircumcised'. Subsequently, Abraham 'received circumcision as sign and seal of his righteousness'.[5] This sequence, Stott argues, is paralleled in the sacrament of baptism:

> Now, what circumcision was to Abraham, Isaac and his descendants, baptism is to us. It is not only the sign of covenant membership, but a seal or pledge of covenant blessings. Baptism does not convey these blessings to us, but conveys to us a right or title to them, so that if and when we truly believe, we inherit the blessing to which baptism has entitled us.[6]

This chronological separation between the rite and grace is essential to Stott's argument. Because Abraham's faith was not simultaneous with his circumcision this becomes illustrative of how grace functions in baptism. In this way, baptism is like inheriting a fortune to which a person is legally barred access until they come of age; baptism may give the individual 'right or title' to regeneration by grace, but that grace remains held in trust until received by faith. Hence, for the unbeliever who receives baptism 'unworthily' or the infant who receives baptism without faith, regeneration and justification remain on hold. According to Stott, this view of baptismal grace overcomes the tension between the language of baptismal regeneration and evangelical insistence upon the necessity of faith. Further, the reprobate Protestant does not represent a failure of baptismal grace, but a personal failure to receive that grace by faith.

3 John Stott 'Baptism' p 54
4 John Stott 'Baptism' p 55
5 John Stott 'Baptism' p 55
6 John Stott 'Baptism' p 55

Three things should be noted at this point. First, Stott's solution is to the problem of cultural Protestantism wherein baptism is not synonymous with regeneration and salvation. Secondly, critical to his solution is an instrumental view of faith or 'decision'; viz the decision to repent and believe is what releases the grace of regeneration into the believer's life. Finally, Stott's appeals to covenant, grace, baptism, faith, regeneration, and salvation are primarily individual matters with little regard to being engrafted into the covenant people of God. Certainly, this would strike a Jew as odd. How can one speak of biblical covenant, the grace of God, salvation, or regeneration without reference to a people? All the more astonishing would be his use of Abraham and circumcision to prove his point, for in Judaism Abraham is always a symbol of the election of Israel through the covenant established by Yahweh.

What drives this odd configuration of covenant and grace is Stott's concern to bring the individual as agent into the process of regeneration. Quoting J B Mosley, Stott argues that through our 'decision' we become 'qualified' for grace and thus release it to ourselves. Thus, we cannot be saved until we are 'worthy' and we are not worthy to receive God's grace until we believe:

> Baptism, correctly administered, has thus one effect which is universal and invariable, whatever be the state or condition of the baptized person at the time, viz. a title or pledge for the grace of the sacrament upon worthiness.[7]

Again, the language quoted here by Stott should strike us as odd. At what point am I 'worthy' to receive regeneration? Is regeneration a meritorious accomplishment of the individual will, or the gracious initiative of God to establish a people regenerated through the power of the Holy Spirit?

Circumcision, Faith, and the Covenant

Circumcision never did function *ex opere operato*. Either one was or one was not a 'son of the covenant' at birth and for males circumcision was the sign and seal of that reality. Nonetheless, circumcision represented far more than mere ethnic identity as a Jew. God's covenant with Abraham and subsequent circumcision bound Israel as God's elect to live in faithfulness to the covenant: to reveal Yahweh as the living God and what it meant to be in a loving relationship with him (Deut 4:6). Circumcision was thus not merely a physiological distinctive separating the Jewish people from the surrounding nations, but a divine vocation. Thus, although Abraham's faith

7 J B Mozley as quoted in Stott p 56

and his circumcision are temporally separated, they are necessarily related in that both Abraham's faith and his circumcision are deeply implicated in God's actions in the world to save and redeem it.

Circumcision as a Means of Grace

In what manner then was circumcision a means of grace and what was its role in salvation for the Jew under the Old Covenant? Part of our problem in seeing the relationship between circumcision, the law, salvation and grace is that we labour under a wrong understanding as to what constituted salvation under the Old Covenant. As has been shown by E P Sanders, James Dunn and others, salvation meant being part of God's covenant people.[8] Adherence to the law did not earn salvation so much as maintain one's place within God's covenant community. The law as well as circumcision were thus 'the expression and the safeguard for the covenant';[9] circumcision signified one's place in the covenantal community even as Torah adherence maintained it. In this manner, circumcision, cultus and the law set forth the communal parameters wherein the promises of God, the blessings of God, and the effects of his gracious presence and forgiveness could be embodied, understood, and shared.

The sacred nature of individual and communal life was understood, measured and maintained in terms of the parameters set by circumcision and the Torah. Hence, for males born outside the covenant who wished to convert to Judaism, circumcision was a necessary rite one had to undergo to be part of the covenant people of God. This was no 'bare token' in that for both ethnic Jew and proselyte, circumcision was the physical sign and seal of the communal and spiritual reality of covenant relationship with Yahweh. Circumcision served not only to signify one's embodiment in the covenant, but more significantly it came to define what that relationship entailed.

Circumcision and Regeneration

Simply establishing a chronological separation between faith and circumcision does not adequately explain how the covenant and the problematic nature of circumcision are articulated through the early church's understanding of regeneration. Regeneration in the New Testament is based upon interpretations of the Law and the Prophets in

8 James D G Dunn *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1998) p 354. Dunn's own analysis is founded upon the seminal work by E P Sanders *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press 1977) pp 75, 236, 511-13.

9 Dunn *The Theology of Paul* p 355

light of Jesus' fulfilment of God's promises to establish a people with a renewed heart of love for him. We see this link between circumcision and regeneration in Deuteronomy. Here, renewal is symbolized by a spiritual circumcision that occurs after Israel's exile and return to the land: 'The Lord your God will *circumcise* your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul and live' (Deut 30:4-6). Here, circumcision is not a penitential act on Israel's part to appease God, but rather the gracious initiative of God to re-establish Israel in a loving relationship with himself, thus echoing the original divine initiative of circumcision (Gen 17:10-14). This regenerative spiritual circumcision by God fulfils the original intention of the rite: to establish a chosen people who love God with their 'whole heart, soul strength and mind' (Deut 6:5). This new sensitivity and loving obedience which results from God's spiritual circumcision of his people is definitive of regeneration both individually and corporately even as 'circumcision' now takes on symbolic significance to point to renewal of the covenant with Yahweh. In this manner, the rite of circumcision serves as the linguistic foundation used by the prophet to convey what is meant by spiritual rebirth.

Negatively, however, circumcision was also used to signify the failure of Israel to maintain the covenant. Thus, in Jeremiah 9:25ff the prophet declares that though Israel may be physically circumcised they are condemned as uncircumcised: '"The days are coming" declares the Lord, "when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh... For all these nations are really uncircumcised, and even the whole house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart."' In this instance, circumcision, rather than establishing the parameters of Yahweh's gracious and salvific election of Israel, now serves to expose Israel's apostasy and profanation of God's name; hence, the call of the prophet to a return to the contiguous relationship between circumcision and Israel's divine vocation. Once again regeneration is realized in an increased sensitivity to God through a spiritual surgery to replace hard and insensitive hearts (spiritual circumcision):

> 'The time is coming' says the Lord 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers... I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people' (Jer 31:31ff).

This is echoed in Ezekiel 11:19ff:

> I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of

> flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people and I will be their God.

and in 36:25ff:

> I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

The above texts unveil the eschatological hope of regeneration and its role in the unfolding history of Israel. Moreover, the intelligibility of that narrative history necessarily draws from the critical symbol of circumcision to bring structure and meaning to the discourse. The spiritual reality signified requires for its definition the symbolic crucible of circumcision to stabilize and explicate what regeneration entails. Nonetheless, the symbol of circumcision, as we have seen, had become problematic with both positive and negative connotations; though it symbolized the hope of regeneration, it also revealed the degradation and faithlessness of Israel and the resulting gulf between their physical circumcision and a true communal and spiritual union with Yahweh.

New Testament and Regeneration

Symbolically and practically, the ambiguous relationship between physical circumcision and covenant relationship intensified with the infusion of Gentiles into the followers of Christ through faith. In Acts 15:5-11 we read that some followers of Christ demanded that the gentile believers be circumcised, but Peter, echoing the prophets, argues that 'God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith.' Peter addresses here the critical paradox facing the nascent *ecclesia*: the influx of gentile believers purified by the Holy Spirit even while so many circumcised Jews remain outside God's New Covenant community. Hence, God's purification by faith now serves as evidence of covenantal status in God's New Covenant community and no longer would circumcision be a necessary rite of covenantal inclusion.

This change of attitude can be seen in Paul's allusions to circumcision in his letter to the Romans: 'A man is not a Jew if he is one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not

by the written code' (Rom 2:28-9a). Just as with Peter in Acts, for Paul covenant relationship with God is not based on the outward and physical mark of circumcision, but on the inward circumcision of the heart done by the Holy Spirit. Just as circumcision involved the literal removal of flesh, so with Paul spiritual circumcision refers to putting off 'the body of flesh':

> For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ who is the head over every power and authority. In him you were also circumcised, in putting off the body of flesh, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men, but with the circumcision of Christ having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead [my own translation]. Col 2:9-12

In this passage, Christian spiritual circumcision (regeneration) consists of the removal of the 'body of flesh' by the 'circumcision of Christ'. According to N T Wright and James Dunn, what Paul means by 'body of flesh' is not so much the removal of the deviant 'sinful nature', though it may involve this, but a far more profound transfer of solidarity and communion represented in baptism.[10] Accordingly, baptism suggests here that the believer has been transferred, through sharing in Christ's death in baptism, from the dominion of this world and thus engrafted into the cosmic and eschatological reality of the covenant people of God: the church. So Dunn:

> ...it is precisely a sharing in his circumcision-death, not an independent act of [the] Christian's own circumcision-death. It is because they share in a body which transmutes, as it were from cosmic body ('head over all rule and authority', 2:10), through [the] body of flesh done to death, to his body the church, that their conversion has cosmic and eschatological implications.[11]

According to Dunn, Paul's reference in Colossians 3:12 is to Spirit baptism as opposed to the rite of water baptism and thus it is Spirit baptism which constitutes the radical change of covenant status for the believer. In this Dunn rightly calls attention to the necessity of a spiritual transformation that at once transcends the old boundary of physical circumcision and sets apart a New Covenant community inclusive of Jew and Gentile even as it excludes those who have the physical mark of circumcision without the spiritual reality. This fits well with the narrative history we have seen with regards to spiritual regeneration as the evidence

10 N T Wright *The Epistle of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1986) p 106 and James Dunn *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1996) p 158

11 Dunn p 158

of covenant status. Nonetheless, unlike circumcision, there is little to suggest a parallel dichotomy between the initiatory rite of water baptism and the subjective experience of Spirit baptism. Even if the reference to a spiritual regeneration is the primary focus of baptism here, severing that experience from the symbolism of water baptism is counter-intuitive in that it cuts against the import of the language Paul uses here as well as in his similar reference to baptism in Romans 6:1ff. In what manner is the striking image of being 'buried with him [Christ] in baptism' expressive of Spirit baptism in Acts or elsewhere? Certainly, the images of death, burial and resurrection conform far more convincingly to that of the initiate being lowered into the baptismal water only to rise again.

The problem with Dunn's position on Spirit baptism, both in Colossians 2 and Romans 6, is that it fails to grasp that Paul is in fact attempting to ground enigmatic spiritual experience in the more concrete doctrinal and theological language of water baptism itself. I agree with Dunn that Paul's emphasis here speaks to the spiritual transformation of regeneration by the Holy Spirit. Nonetheless, Paul's grounding of that experience in baptism reveals that the covenantal transposition implied is not only spiritual, cosmic, and eschatological, but communal, ontological and practical through the engrafting of the initiate into the body of Christ signified in the rite of baptism. Grace is conveyed at this point wherein spiritual regeneration is grasped through union with the death and resurrection of Christ embodied and signified in the rite of water baptism. Thus, regeneration and salvation are not mere subjective experience but a real transfer into the body of Christ. This entry into the covenantal communion of the body of Christ represents to the initiate a new mode of existence wherein they put off the solidarities of the world and put on Christ (again the language of baptism). In this manner, as we see in Romans 6 and Colossians 2, the structure of the rite serves to establish the communal parameters wherein the experience of new birth in Christ can be embodied, understood, and shared. N T Wright commenting on Colossians 3:12 puts it well:

> As a Jew, Paul had believed in the solidarity of the racial people of God. In becoming a Christian, he transferred to the church the idea that the people of God was indeed a people — not now, indeed, drawn from one race only, but made up from every family under heaven (c.f. Gal. 3:26-29). This people is not merely an invisible family known to God alone, but is an actual company of people in space and time, the church in which Christ is confessed as Lord: outward and visible entry into this outward and visible family is accomplished through the rite of baptism.[12]

12 N T Wright *The Epistle of Paul* p 107

Thus, the experience of faith or adult decision for Christ, though a necessary part of adult covenant status, is not the means that triggers regeneration but indeed its evidence.[13] Subjective conversion experiences vary according to culture, personality, and situation and thus are a questionable yardstick by which to measure or define what we mean by faith or regeneration. No set of emotions, no isolated spiritual encounter, no programmed response, no fixed decision on its own can serve as the unambiguous definition and measure of regeneration and salvation. Instead, as J I Packer has wisely pointed out, 'only a life of present convertedness can justify confidence that a person was converted at some point in his or her past'.[14] Moreover, the true import and shape of a life of 'present covertedness', at least according to Paul in Romans 6, arises out of the interpretive framework of the rite of baptism.

The transfer of those who were dead in sin and now alive in Christ through the gracious act of God gives rise to a new existence in Christ of which faith is its first fruit. Thus, contra Stott, the effect of baptism is not mere title to a regeneration that is mechanically effected at the point of our cognitive affirmation of faith, nor is it some sort of magical rite that zaps us with instant regeneration, nor is it an empty cipher void of power to radically transform our lives. It is nothing so ethereal, so automatic, or so meaningless. Rather, baptism is the symbolic linguistic crucible of regeneration and new birth which gives form to the substance of faith in Christ. Therein regeneration is signified by our being gathered to a people where the Holy Spirit works through our existence in the church to conform us to Christ. Through baptism we enter this mode of existence, either willingly as adults or unwillingly as infants. Nonetheless, this regeneration is not triggered by my faith, rather my faith in Christ is its culmination. This is the essence of a Reformed understanding of the church. Our being gathered to the church is not the result of our choosing, rather we are called by God into relationship.

Does this negate the necessity of faith? By no means. Without faith baptism remains sterile and without signification. Does this imply that baptism is a bare token, irrelevant to the grace of regeneration? Certainly not. Rather the rite of water baptism articulates the true nature and shape of regeneration in God's covenant community. It is the symbolic crucible which articulates the deep structure of biblical regeneration: a life transformed according to the death and resurrection of Christ. Does this rule out confirmation? On the contrary it demands it, for the sign of our being truly the covenant community of God is an undivided heart and faith in Christ. Does it make the individual or the church the author of salvation

13 See William Dumbrell's 'Justification and the New Covenant' *Churchman* Vol 112/1 1998 pp 18-19

14 J I Packer *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Downers Grove: IVP 1984) p 64

or worthy thereof? Absolutely not, indeed this view of baptism holds to its entirely gracious nature. What does it say as to the nature of the church? That the church is not an invisible, otherworldly entity known only to God, but is known by its individual and corporate conformity to Christ's death and resurrection and the new life signified in baptism. What is the benefit of this understanding of the sacrament? That regeneration and salvation are not finally dependent on the ebb and flow of subjective experience, emotions, or even decisions, though these are undoubtedly important to faith, but upon the fact that God by grace has brought the believer into spiritual union with him signified and sealed in baptism and evidenced in faith.

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