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so to betray one's Christian identity. Quite to the contrary, (it is to answer the call to bear that witness with integrity,) in manner as well as word: it is to attest the Evangel evangelically.

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Dr. Nigel Biggar is Librarian of Latimer House, Oxford. p. 325

One Baptism or Two? Reflections on the History of Christian Baptism

David F. Wright

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I have no doubt that some of my audience have undergone two baptisms—two water baptisms, that is. They may not now regard their first one as a baptism, but such a nicety need not detain us at this stage. (After all, it was certainly baptism in the mind of all those involved at the time who were capable of judging, and would be so reckoned by the great consensus of Christian people down the centuries.)

I am also confident that many of my listeners can immediately think of churches which they instinctively regard as outstanding when measured by recognized yardsticks, but most of whose baptisms are not in their view Christian baptisms. These congregations' main form of baptism is not that of my presumed hearers, and so much the worse for that, since the latter's is alone true Christian baptism.

One baptism or two? Is the state of affairs I have conjured up a matter of great concern to evangelical Christians today? It is my conviction that it should be, and if this lecture achieves anything, I hope it will at least provoke some to reflect afresh on 'the waters that divide', as Donald Bridge and David Phypers entitle their helpful introduction to 'the baptism debate'.[1] For this split among us is a blatant affront to a cherished axiom of the Reformation—the perspicuity of the scriptures. How can they be so clear to the reading of faith if they speak to us in such contradictory terms on baptism? I doubt if any other disagreement poses so sharp a challenge to this pristine protestant conviction. It is high irony that this principle should have been so powerfully articulated in the very context in which this gulf first opened up. Medieval anticipations of the sixteenth-century breach between magisterial and Anabaptist Reformers were of negligible significance.

It is also surprising that the ecumenical movement, which has occupied so many of the energies of the churches in the twentieth century, should have been so slow to grasp this particular nettle. It is only in the last ten years or so that it has featured high on the agenda of the Faith and Order arm of the World Council of Churches. Its earlier, p. 326 long-lasting preoccupation with the interrelated issues of ministry and eucharist has contributed, I suggest, to an ecumenical undervaluing of baptism, which finds a parallel in evangelical Christianity. Both main traditions have for too long given inadequate recognition to the

[1] Leicester, 1977.

constitutive and practical significance of baptism in New Testament Christianity. When ecumenical theologians tell us that the church is a eucharist community, I respond that they would be far truer to the New Testament to call it a baptismal community. When they set before us the goal of intercommunication, I want to place a higher premium on interbaptism. It is my judgement—or perhaps I should say my impression (the subject would make a good research topic)—that in the New Testament baptism is more often made the ground of exhortation, admonition and instruction than the Lord's Supper. This is what I mean by the constitutive and practical significance of baptism for the apostolic churches. It is seen most obviously in Romans 6:1–4, where Paul exposes the absurdity of continuing to sin so that grace might increase by reminding his Roman readers of what happened to them in baptism. A similar style of reasoning on the basis of baptism is found elsewhere, most remarkably at 1 Corinthians 15:29, where Paul grounds belief in the resurrection of the dead in the obscure practice of baptism 'for the dead'.

We have still to recover the importance of baptism as a point of reference and departure in our applied theology. How many of us, faced with Paul's problem in Romans 6, would have dealt with it in terms of the baptismal character of the Christian, as he did? How many of us have learned to repel the assaults of Satan as Luther did, by declaring '*Baptizatus sum*' ('I have been baptized', or perhaps 'I am a baptized person'—to bring out the force of the perfect tense)? (Did not Jesus act in very much the same way according to the Gospels, when, in the face of Satanic testing, he determined to be true to his baptismal calling?). The emphasis in some modern theology on baptism as the ordination of all God's people picks up another strand in Luther, namely his insistence that all Christians are priests by virtue of their baptism, but this is an applied theological use of baptism which may not have obvious New Testament warrant.

BAPTISM AND CHRISTIAN UNITY

What is crystal-clear in the Pauline letters is the correlation between baptism and Christian unity. Here are four illustrations of this theme: (1) 1 Corinthians 12:13—although we are many separate individuals, 'we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or P. 327 Greeks, slaves or free'; (2) Galatians 3:27, where the argument is quite similar—'all of you who were baptised into Christ have been clothed with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'; (3) 1 Corinthians 1:13—'Were you baptized into the name of Paul?' Their baptism into the single name of Christ renders their party divisions outrageously incongruous; (4) (and here we rejoin the title of this lecture) Ephesians 4:5, where, in a notably triadic or trinitarian passage, Paul lists among the realities that constitute our oneness in the Spirit 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism'.

This last text requires more extended consideration. There are two things it does not mean. First, it is not a knock-down argument (or an argument of any kind) against second baptism. The oneness it affirms is not that of temporal onceness (though one could compile a long list of distinguished theologians who have used it as a conclusive proof-text to this end). Second, the baptism of which Paul speaks is very simply the ordinance or rite or sacrament that was administered to new believers and initiated them into the church of Christ. That is to say, this 'one baptism' is not Christ's one baptism on our behalf in his atoning life, death and resurrection. This intepretation was advocated by J A T

Robinson[2] and has enjoyed the support in recent years of some theologians, particularly in the neo-orthodox tradition. (A letter that T F Torrance once wrote to *The Scotsman*[3] on the occasion of some baptismal controversy in the Church of Scotland distinguished between 'a rite of initiation (in water) and the actual baptism (in blood) with which Christ was baptized on our behalf'. Although he proceeded to ground 'the mere rite' in Christ's baptism, this exegesis has damaging consequences for the way we think about and practise baptism, as well as losing contact with the context in Ephesians 4.)

Paul's undoubted meaning here is simply that the baptism we undergo is common to us all, as is the 'one Lord'. Baptism is a unifying factor because each of us severally passes through it into the one body of Christ. This (in my view indubitable) reading of the text may have implications for the repetition of baptism, and is quite compatible with more than one explanation of the relation between Christ's baptism and ours, but it does not say anything as such about either subject. p. 328

Having clarified the meaning of Ephesians 4:5, we must not pass without allowing God's word in Paul's words to address its challenge to us. Are you able as a college community to make this confession your own and, to declare that. you are all united by a common baptism? One Lord—yes; 'one faith'—yes; but 'one baptism'? We come back to the questions with which we began. Are 'the waters that divide' so deep and broad that we cannot link hands in fellowship from one side to the other?

In his commentary on Ephesians, Bishop B F Westcott comments that we might have expected to find in this list in chapter 4 the phrase 'one bread' or some similar mention of the eucharist.[4] We know from 1 Corinthians 10:17 that Paul was capable of arguing from the 'one loaf' of the supper to our oneness in Christ's body, but he did not do so here. The various quasi-credal or confessional formulae discernible in the New Testament, chiefly in the Epistles, never, unless I am mistaken, refer to the Lord's Supper. Baptismal allusions, on the other hand, are identifiable in several of them.[5] This should not surprise us, for the occasion of baptism was perhaps the most significant context for the confession of the faith in the early church. This was not a matter of testifying to one's own experience, as happens at too many Baptist baptisms today, but of making one's own the common confession of the believing community of which one was becoming, in baptism, a member.

THE NICENE CREED

Of the early formal and fixed creeds of the church the one which enjoys the widest acceptance among the different Christian traditions is the Nicene Creed, or, more accurately, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, for it derives not from the Council of Nicaea of 325 but from the second ecumenical council at Constantinople in 381. Its date of origin is important for the interpretation of its clause about baptism, 'We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.' Not only in the New Testament but also in the most authoritative creed of the Christian church we encounter an affirmation of 'one baptism'. What does the phrase denote in the Nicene Creed?

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[2] 'The One Baptism as a Category of New Testament Soteriology', *SJT* 6 (1953) 257–74, reprinted in his *Twelve New Testament Studies* (Studies in Biblical Theology 34 (London, 1962) 158–175. For conclusive refutation see W E Moore, 'One Baptism', NTS 10 (1963–64) 504–516.

[3] 15 June 1977.

[4] *St Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians* (London, 1906) 58–59.

[5] Cf for example, Rom 10:9, 1 Tim 6:13f. Cf J N D Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds* (London, 1972) 15ff.

This is not a question that allows of a prompt and confident answer, p. 329 for it has yet to receive the extended scholarly discussion it deserves. My response, based upon research in the relevant patristic sources, is not yet as assured as I would like it to be. It is certainly paradoxical, for I conclude that the Nicene acknowledgement of 'one baptism for the remission of sins' already implies some parting of the waters. Its baptism is the baptism of believers, or at least of those who have sins to be remitted, and does not embrace infant baptism, or, as we should call it for clarity's sake, 'baby baptism'. This is not because baby baptism had not entered the practice of the Eastern Church by the later fourth century. It certainly had, although how commonly it was observed is difficult to say. But in so far as the fourth-century Greek Fathers touch explicitly on the question, they seem to have believed that babies were not sinners or sinful and hence, if baptized, were not baptized 'for the remission of sins'.

A lecture does not lend itself to a detailed presentation of the evidence that justifies such an interpretation.[6] A few indications must suffice on this occasion. John Chrysostom's enormous corpus of homilies and other works contains less than a handful of references to paedobaptism, but one of his baptismal catcheses speaks directly to this question.[7] He enumerates ten gifts of baptism, for it is a mistake to think that it confers only the remission of sins. 'It is on this account that we baptize even infants, although they have no sins, that they may be given the further gifts of sanctification, righteousness, adoption as sons,' etc. The only other source whose evidence is directly to the point is a poem by Gregory Nazianzus, one of the Cappadocian trio whose reconstructive theological work lies behind the creed of 381. He refers to baptism as a seal of God—for infants only a seal, but for adults a remedy as well as a seal.[8] The same writer's oration on baptism appears to bear out the implication of this poetic allusion, that infants have no need of baptismal healing or medicine. Babies in danger of death must be baptized without delay, he advises, 'for it is better that they should be unconsciously sanctified than depart this life unsealed and uninitiated'. Others should wait until they are at least about three years old, 'when they may be able to listen and to answer p. 330 something about the sacrament …' Even then they come to the font only to be fortified 'because of the sudden assaults of danger that befall us', 'for of sins of ignorance owing to their tender years they have no account to give'.[9]

The Eastern Fathers of the fourth century seem generally to have viewed the benefits of baptism for babies as twofold—the bestowal of gifts such as eternal life, and strengthening against the hazards of earthly existence. I have found no evidence to suggest that any of them could have applied the baptismal clause of the Nicene Creed to baby baptism. However unfamiliar we may be with the baptismal theology of these Greek Fathers, their reasons for baptising babies were broadly those advanced by the Pelagians in their controversy with Augustine in the fifth century in the West. Although infant baptism is attested in the church from the late second century onwards, if not earlier, it was very much a rite in search of a theology until Augustine supplied it in his doctrine of original sin.

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[6] Cf my essay 'How Controversial Was the Development of Infant Baptism in the Early Church?', forthcoming in J E Bradley and R A Muller (eds), *Church, Word and Spirit: Historical and Theological Essays in Honor of Geoffrey W Bromiley* (Grand Rapids, 1987).

[7] *Baptismal Catecheses* 3:6 (tr P W Harkins, *St John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions* (Westminster, MD, and London, 1963) 57.

[8] *Carmina Dogmatica* 9:91–92 (*PG* 37, 463–464).

[9] *Oration* 40:28, cf 40:17.

What, then, is the reference of 'one baptism for the remission of sins'? The context of this statement is the early church's bewildering hang-up over the problem of post-baptismal sin. The clause may be paraphrased as follows: in so far as baptism is given for the remissions of sins, a person may receive it only once. There may be, indeed there are, other means for the remission of sins after baptism, but baptism itself cannot be repeated for this purpose. Texts in support of this interpretation are to be found in Cyril of Jerusalem's *Catechetical Lectures* and in Chrysostom's *Baptismal Catecheses*.[10] Cyril's explanation is particularly interesting. If it were possible to receive baptism a second or third time, 'it might be said, "Though I fail once, I shall go right next time".' If you fail once, 'there is no setting things right, for there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism"(!). None but heretics are rebaptized, since their former baptism was not baptism.' Chrysostom's explanation agrees with Cyril's: 'Since the old contract of debt is destroyed, let us be alert to prevent any second contract. For there is no second cross, nor a second remission by the bath of regeneration. There is remission, but not a second remission by baptism.'

So the baptismal clause in this fundamental creed turns out to have a very restricted reference. Its 'one baptism' is not the 'one baptism' of Ephesians 4. It affirms not the common, single baptism that unites all the baptized, but the unrepeatability of the baptismal remission of sins. In these terms, it cannot easily encompass baby baptism, which a p. 331 consensus in the East in the fourth century refused to link with the forgiveness of sins. (One can visualize an indirect relevance of the Nicene statement to paedobaptism. Even if it is accepted that babies are not baptized for the remission of sins, the creed presumably excludes the possibility of those baptized as babies being subsequently baptized again for the remission of [post-baptismal] sin).

REBAPTISM

Another important issue in the early church to which the Nicene Creed says nothing is the rebaptism within the Catholic Church of those already baptized in heresy or schism. Cyril of Jerusalem, as we have just seen, explicitly debars such an assertion of 'one baptism' from excluding the rebaptism of heretics. Given the prominence of rebaptism controversies in the Western Church, particularly from the mid-third century for almost another two hundred years, it is remarkable that hardly any of the local creeds in use in the West include an affirmation of 'one baptism'.[11] More specifically, it never featured in any creed in the North African Church of Cyprian and Augustine, which was a hotbed of disputes over rebaptism. Although one can easily enough conceive how the Nicene clause could be cited to the disadvantage of the rebaptizing Donatist, it originally had nothing to do with this Western quarrel. Moreover, it is important to insist upon the irrelevance of the Nicene Creed to the questions of schismatic baptism faced by the North African Fathers. The history of baptismal practice and discussion is littered with the inappropriate application of texts and formulae (such as the assertions of 'one baptism' in Ephesians 4 and the Nicene Creed), without regard to their original meaning. Cyprian rebaptized schismatics, and the Donatists rebaptized Catholics, not because these schismatics and Catholics had committed serious post-baptismal sin but because the schismatic or Catholic baptism they had received was, in the judgement of the rebaptizers (Cyprian and the Donatists) no baptism at all. The latter regarded themselves, of course,

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[10] Cyril, *Procatachesis* 7; Chrysostom, *Baptismal Catecheses* 3:23, 63:4.

[11] The evidence can be seen in A Hahn, *Bibliothek der Symbole und Glaubensregeln der Alten Kirche* (Breslau, 1897).

as dispensing not rebaptism but (first) baptism *de novo*. We must further remember that such rebaptismal policy had nothing whatever to do with the form or manner of administration of the false baptisms. Their rejection by the baptizers was a straightforward corollary of their refusal to recognize anything from God—grace, Spirit, salvation, forgiveness—outside their own P. 332 true church which was the Catholic Church for Cyprian, and the Donatist Church for the Donatists.

Cyprian's practice, which the Donatists later followed, was controversial in his own day and was abandoned by the Catholic Church within half a century. Augustine spelt out an influential theology of baptism that justified this abandonment and the church's recognition of the validity, within strict limits, of baptism administered outside the church. The Augustinian position became the norm in Western Christianity, so that rebaptism *on the grounds argued by Cyprian and his successors* has not been common since the patristic era. Even during the centuries when the Roman Church accorded no churchly status whatever to Protestant bodies, it did not normally rebaptize converts from Protestantism, although it often hedged its bets by the use of conditional baptism ('If you have not been baptized, I baptize you …').

But from time to time church history throws up instances of the administration of rebaptism based on a rejection of the church character of the communion in which baptism was first received. How frequently this has happened, I cannot say: the subject requires further research. Some Waldensians practised rebaptism on these 'Cyprianic' grounds. According to the Fourth Lateran Council the Greek Church had rebaptized Catholics (canon 4). Some nineteenth-century Anglicans refused to accept baptisms that had not been dispensed by an episcopally ordained minister. The more conservative sectors of American Presbyterianism on several occasions in the nineteenth century debated whether Roman Catholic baptism was valid, if the Roman Church could not be recognized as a true church of Christ. Other practices of rebaptism on similar, Cyprianic, grounds could almost certainly be catalogued.

ANABAPTISM

It has been suggested[12] that some cases of rebaptism by sixteenth-century Anabaptists fall into this category. Some Anabaptists, it is argued, rejected Catholic or mainstream Protestant baptism not because it was infant baptism and therefore not Christian baptism at all, but because they rejected root and branch the Constantinian captivity of the state church, whether Roman Catholic or magisterial P. 333 Protestant. It has even been claimed that some of them practised Anabaptist paedobaptism—that is, the second and only true baptism they administered was infant baptism. The subject has not yet been sufficiently researched for this account of Anabaptist practice to be accorded great significance.[13] But is a salutary reminder that between the Anabaptists and the magisterial Reformers yawned a far deeper gulf than separates many today who cannot join hands across 'the waters that divide'. It is a sound instinct when discussing this

[12] L Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids, 1964) 195–197.

[13] Verduin's evidence from Luther does not stand closer scrutiny, as correspondence with Dr Euan Cameron of Newcastle University has helped me realize. But the records of very early Anabaptism in the Wassenberg district are clear enough.

sixteenth-century split not to speak about baptism first of all, and perhaps not to speak about it too much at all.[14]

Nevertheless, baptism is our legitimate talking-point on this occasion. Mainstream Anabaptism, taking its stand on its repristination of New Testament Christianity, could not countenance infant baptism and hence practised ana- or rebaptism. For this Anabaptists suffered, being branded frequently as 'Donatists' and subjected to the sanctions of the anti-Donatist legislation of the early Christian Roman emperors, especially Justinian.[15] The injustice of this treatment has not been adequately acknowledged and repented of by the churches that have inherited the legacy of the magisterial Reformers. Something comparable to the mutual rescinding in 1965 by Pope John VI and Patriarch Athenagoras of Constantinople of the ancient sentences of excommunication of their respective sees would be a splendid gesture. For the iniquity of the punitive measures inflicted on the Anabaptists in the sixteenth century lay not so much in the use of the sword (which was merely par for the course in that age) but in trapping the Anabaptists under legislation directed against Donatists. Both groups rebaptized, but for quite different reasons. The Donatists had no scruples over baby baptism, but rejected Catholic baptism, whether of babies or of adult converts. The mass of the Anabaptists failed to find paedobaptism in the New Testament, and hence administered only believers' baptism. The theologians among the establishment Protestants should not have tolerated the labelling of the Anabaptists as 'Donatists'. We find here another example of the tendency in the p. 334 history of baptism for significant distinctions to be collapsed into simple catch-all constants, such as 'one baptism' or 'rebaptism'.

MODERN DEBATE: LIMA

The modern baptismal divide corresponds in broad terms to that of the sixteenth century, but there is at least one major difference. We appear to have so downgraded the importance of baptism that it has become possible for some of us, at any rate, to disallow a denomination's baptismal practice without calling into question its character as 'church'. For example, the congregations of the Baptist Union of Scotland seem able to regard 95% of the baptisms administered in the Church of Scotland as not Christian baptism without casting aspersions on the Kirk's right to be called a Church of Christ (unless I am being overgenerous to Scottish Baptists). But it is *prima facie* an anomalous standpoint to adopt, especially if one holds, with the Reformers of every stripe, that the ministry of the gospel sacraments is an indispensable mark of the church. Such an attitude could not conceivably have gained currency until after the sixteenth century. It suggests an awkward dilemma for the stricter sort of Baptists to this day, for a church that is not a baptismal community is, by New Testament standards, a very odd entity indeed.

The second half of the twentieth century is witnessing some unprecedented developments on the baptismal scene. In 1982 was published the so-called Lima report, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (*BEM* for short).[16] This is a product of the Faith and Order Commission within the World Council of Churches, and reached its final form at a

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[14] This was brought home to me when a Mennonite scholar submitted for a theological dictionary an article on 'Anabaptist Theology' which made no mention of baptism at all.

[15] Cf Verduin, *op cit*, ch 1; G H Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (London, 1962) xxiii, 239f.

[16] *Faith and Order Paper* (Geneva, 1982) 111. Cf my *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (*the 'Lima Report'*): *An Evangelical Assessment* (*Rutherford Forum Papers*, 3; Edinburgh, 1984).

conference in Lima in which Catholics and Eastern Orthodox were full participants along with Lutherans, Reformed, Baptists, Anglicans and others. It comprises text and commentary. Although the main text does not represent in every respect a consensus of belief, it is an agreed statement, in that it embodies agreement on how each of the three topics is to be understood, including points of continuing difference.

This is a report of enormous importance. It has already become within most of the churches the standard starting-point for ecumenical reflection on baptism, eucharist and ministry. In a nutshell, its approach to the divergence in baptismal practice suggests that there may not be much difference between infant baptism followed by p. 335 Christian nurture within the believing community issuing in personal confession of faith, and the nurture of a child within the congregation, perhaps after thanksgiving for its birth and the parents' commitment to their Christian responsibility, leading to baptism on personal confession of faith.[17] Two key sentences which appear in the commentary are these: 'The differences between infant and believers' baptism become less sharp when it is recognized that both forms of baptism embody God's own initiative in Christ and express a response of faith made within the believing community … A discovery of the continuing character of Christian nurture may facilitate the mutual acceptance of different initiation practices.[18]

There is nothing breathtakingly new in *BEM*'s consideration of baptism, except that, on the basis of agreement among official representatives of Baptists as well as the majority of paedobaptist churches, it claims to offer a path to interbaptism—the mutual recognition of the two dominant forms of baptism. Much might be said about *BEM*,[19] which is a text we dare not ignore. I commend it for study, for one reason in particular. If, with our evangelical commitment to the supreme authority and the clarity of scripture, we have been unable to find a route through the baptismal impasse (a bridge across the baptismal gulf), ought we not to start thinking about a biblical frame of reference in which we can agree to accept and live with both baptismal traditions? It is at least worth considering.

'EQUIVALENT ALTERNATIVES'

What the Lima report proposes in theological terms is already a reality in some churches, namely, the observance of both infant and believers' baptism as 'equivalent alternatives' (this being almost a technical phrase by now) in the normal course of congregational life. The United Reformed Church in England and Scotland and the Church of North India are the two bodies following this procedure best known to me, but some independent congregations mostly south of the border are also 'double-practice' churches. Others have moved some way to this position by openly and formally authorising the non-observance of their norm of paedobaptism—and hence allowing with approval the non-baptism as babies of the offspring of Christian parents. The French Reformed Church and one of the main American Presbyterian P. 336 Churches have adopted this policy, which has even to a limited extent been at least condoned by one or two bishops in the Church of England.

Each of these two groups of churches is in its way highly significant. The United Reformed Church and the Church of North India are the result of church unions in which both Baptists and paedobaptists were involved. It will be very interesting to observe how

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[17] cf 'Baptism', para 12.

[18] 'Baptism', commentary (12).

[19] For my brief evaluation, see n 16 above.

baptismal practice develops in such churches. Will believers' baptism slowly make baby baptism less and less common? I have so far been unable to find out anything about trends in the Church of North India, nor has any clear change yet been identified in the United Reformed Church. One would expect that, in so far as each individual congregation will have to come into these united churches out of either a Baptist or a paedobaptist tradition, with no prior experience of an 'equivalent alternatives' baptismal ministry, cross-fertilization will proceed slowly, except perhaps where congregations originally of different traditions become a single congregation within the united church.

The other category of churches that have officially countenanced a departure from invariable paedobaptism as the norm, is even more interesting. The reasons behind their revised policy are no doubt of different kinds: recognition of the greater reluctance of even some Christian parents today to decide for their children; accommodation to the unceasing and perhaps increasing questioning of infant baptism on both historical and theological grounds (after all, the two most influential Reformed theologians of this century have forcefully rejected infant baptism—Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann); respect for a new atmosphere of ecumenical baptismal debate; even perhaps an attempt to come to terms with the difficulties of administering a consistent paedobaptist discipline as the age of Christendom and the Christian society no longer provides viable models for remnant or gathered churches.

The *BEM* approach, exemplified in the fully-fledged 'double-practice' churches, appears to accept that there is no realistic hope of reaching agreement on one form of baptism. One could, however, put a different complexion on their expectations—namely, that agreement, if it is to come at all, will emerge only from allowing the two baptisms to cohabit within one family. I find it intriguing that one of the chief architects of the *BEM* construction, Geoffrey Wainwright, who is a Methodist, is on record back in 1969 as conceiving of a modified Baptist pattern as the most hopeful for the ecumenical future.[20]
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POLARIZATION

One short-term or medium-term result of ecumenical encounter on baptism has in fact been increased polarization.[21] (This experience has many parallels in ecumenical engagement.) Baptists have rightly challenged paedobaptists whether they really regard infant baptism as full, complete baptism. If they do, why do they place so much stress on confirmation or admission to communicant membership? Are we not members of Christ's body by virtue of baptism, and ought not baptism to admit to the Lord's Table? *BEM* itself points up the incongruity of interposing some other ecclesiastical rite between baby baptism and entry to the Lord's Supper.[22] It is an index of the unbiblical imbalance some of our evangelical churches have fallen into on baptism that this later ceremony is accorded greater significance than baptism itself. It is not unknown, even in our blue-riband evangelical congregations, to have a teenage convert baptised prior to a service, in the presence of the elders alone, before he or she proceeds into the congregation to be admitted to communicant status on a par with others who had the good fortune to have

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[20] *Christian Initiation* (London, 1969) 80–83.

[21] Cf G Warner, 'Baptism from Accra to Lima', in M Thurian (ed), *Ecumenical Perspectives on Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (*Faith and Order Paper*, 116; Geneva, 1983) 27.

[22] 'Baptism', commentary (14) (b).

been baptized in infancy. If we administer baptism to babies, we have no warrant to treat it as less than the full dominical ordinance or sacrament.

This polarization may retard progress. Baptists may be more likely to adjust to a 'double-practice' policy when paedobaptists accept that baby baptism is incomplete until something like confirmation (ie, a formal, public personal profession of faith) has taken place. Baptists might be readier to 'buy' paedobaptism on these terms—baptism by instalments, as it were. I very much hope that this will not be the case. It is surely far healthier to acknowledge that we have inherited two different patterns of baptism, and to accept the other's practice without being able to endorse it, than to fudge the issue in this way.

ORIGINS

I also refuse to abandon the historical enquiry into the beginnings of Christian baptism. I cannot resign myself to the view that everything has been said that can be said and that, short of the discovery of new evidence (such as Paul's lost third letter to Timothy on how to baptise P. 338 babies), no headway will be made on baptismal origins. There is no time now to open up this aspect of our subject. I have recently argued elsewhere that a surprising amount of the evidence in the earliest centuries is patient of the interpretation that quite young children were baptized on their own profession.[23] It is intriguing that the very first attestation of infant baptism as the normal practice (in Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition*, c.215) is in the form of an instruction how to baptize—first those who can answer for themselves and then those who cannot. At what age would children in a newly converted family be able to answer for themselves? We have already cited the recommendation of Gregory of Nazianzus that infants should preferably not be baptized until they were about three years of age when they could listen and 'answer something about the sacrament'. It is evidence like this that makes me protest vehemently at talk of 'adult baptism'. If we all took our bearings from the earliest differentiation between those too young to answer for themselves and those, perhaps of quite young, *infant* years, who could. (This distinction also, by the way, provides a ready approach to the baptism of handicapped persons who might not be able to answer for themselves.)

Among other evidence I advance in the study referred to is that inferred from epitaph inscriptions from the third and fourth centuries of young children who were baptized just prior to death. An American scholar, Everett Ferguson of Abilene in Texas, has argued that paedobaptism began from the clinical baptism of very young children.[24] That is to say, baby baptism was perhaps at first given only to dying babies, while others were baptized as and when they could answer for themselves.

The debate about origins was not exhausted by the celebrated exchange between the German scholars Joachim Jeremias and Kurt Aland some twenty years ago.[25] On balance Aland probably had the better of that controversy; it is unlikely that in the first few decades of the church babies were baptized. But it is also true that baby baptism, when it did develop, seems to have been accepted with little or no protest. Tertullian objected (as he did to a good deal else), but on the basis of a baptismal theology and a view of the 'innocence' of infants neither of which many today could share. Those who hold that only professing believers were baptized in the New Testament congregations p. 339 cannot

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[23] Cf my article, 'The Origins of Infant Baptism—Child Believers Baptism?', *SJT* 39 (1987) 1–23.

[24] 'Inscriptions and the Origins of Infant Baptism', *JTS* ns 30 (1979) 34–46.

[25] For the bibliographical details, see my study, *art cit* (n 23 above) 2, n 4.

comfortably dismiss the fact of the development of infant baptism within a century or so. The situation may have required that degree of historical distance from apostolic Christianity's polemical attitude to circumcision in the conflict with the Judaizers for Christians to have perceived a proper parallelism with the Old Testament's covenantal seal.

'BELIEVERS' BAPTISM'

So let us not abandon the question how baptism began. At the same time there is a second issue we should take up together across 'the waters that divide'. When paedobaptist churches baptize persons of mature years on profession of faith are they administering believers' baptism? To put it another way: can we reach an agreed theological understanding about our respective baptisms *of those who answer for themselves*? This may seem a non-issue, but I assure you that it is a substantial one. In the course of recent discussions between representatives of the Church of Scotland and the Baptist Union of Scotland it has become apparent that some in the Church of Scotland deny that it ever practises believers' baptism. The phrase 'believers' baptism' seems to carry with it a theology of baptism that they reject. It would be helpful if both sides could find an agreed, new way of describing the baptismal practice in question. 'The baptism of those who can answer for themselves' is too much of a mouthful, but it avoids the unhappy sound of 'believers' baptism' in some Reformed ears. But the challenge to reach agreement in this quarter goes deeper than words. Again *BEM* is a good starting-point, with its pregnant sentence, 'Baptism is both God's gift and our human response to that gift'.[26] It is perhaps the gravest consequence of the division that has separated our two baptisms that each practice has attracted to itself a one-sided theology. Paedobaptists have allowed the passivity of the baby in baptism to become the supreme paradigm of the reception of divine grace, so that baptism of those who have brought themselves at least physically to the font has to be hedged around lest it fail to express the priority of grace over faith. Baptists, on the other hand, have made personally articulated faith so constitutive of baptism that it has become a testimony to their own religious experience rather than to the grace of God. How many of those who have been baptised as believers were taught to think of what was happening to you in terms P. 340 of Romans 6—or even of Acts 2:38—'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'? (There is indeed scriptural warrant for confessing 'baptism for the remission of sins' along with the Nicene Creed.) Baptists and paedobaptists urgently need to talk together, not first and foremost about what they do differently but what they, *prima facie*, do alike—namely, baptize professing converts.

REBAPTISM TODAY

But probably the most sensitive issue in this field is the one with which I began and to which in conclusion I return—rebaptism, *BEM* declares, 'Baptism is an unrepeatable act. Any practice which might be interpreted as "re-baptism" must be avoided'.[27] This is a curious use of language. If baptism is strictly unrepeatable, ie, incapable of being repeated, why should it be necessary to warn against repeating it? Perhaps a second baptism never,

[26] 'Baptism' para 8.

[27] *Ibid*, para 13.

in the courts of theologians if not of heaven, repeats a first baptism but merely cancels it out altogether. Is *BEM* asserting that 're-baptism' never happens, but that we ought to be extremely careful not to let it appear that it is happening? We should probably discern in this statement in *BEM* unhappiness with the practice of conditional baptism on the opposite pole of the baptismal spectrum.

It remains to be seen whether in the 'double-practice' churches, the pastoral pressure for rebaptism increases or decreases. It is, of course, absolutely fundamental to the 'double-practice' position that a person may receive only one form of baptism. But in these churches for the first time some who have been baptized as babies will be exposed to the administration of baptism on believing profession as one of the church's two norms. It is quite conceivable that in this context requests for rebaptism will grow in number.[28]

Two particular points about this question should be stressed. First, we must all do our utmost to sympathise with the deep-seated dismay, even revulsion, felt in the traditional paedobaptist churches at this p. 341 practice. It is sometimes more instinctive than articulately rational, but it arises from a sense that from its beginnings the church has unambiguously affirmed 'one baptism'. Behind this conviction lies too often an uncritical lumping together of the very different kinds of rebaptism encountered in church history, which I have attempted to disentangle from each other in this lecture. But although they differ, they have all been rejected by the vast majority of the Christian world. The church in its history has manifested for the most part a profound antipathy to repeating baptism.

In the second place, those who belong ecclesiastically to the mainstream tradition must come to terms with the fact that one kind of demand for rebaptism currently abroad among the churches lacks historical precedent and is animated by the utmost seriousness about baptism. The rebaptism that ensues when someone ceases to believe that infant baptism is the genuine article is nothing new; it was what the Anabaptists did in the sixteenth century. Unprecedented, however, is the desire for rebaptism on the part of those who, while not rejecting infant baptism in principle, have come to the position of being unable to accept that their own baptism satisfied the requirements of true Christian baptism. It is important to notice immediately that this conviction may be reached not only about one's baptism as a baby but also about one's prior baptism as, allegedly, a believer. We can all visualize baptisms whose circumstances raise the sharpest doubts in our minds about their meaningfulness to anyone involved, apart perhaps from the baptizing minister.

This is sensitive territory, and must be trodden warily, if not delicately. One may have not a little sympathy with the attitude I have summarized, but disquiet at the same time. On the one hand, the case has not been won by the rigorists, like Colin Buchanan, in some of the Grove Booklets, whose arguments seem to amount to saying 'a baptism is a baptism is a baptism', and cannot ultimately escape from an *ex opere operato* stance about the reality (but not necessarily the efficacy) of every formally valid baptism.[29] The uncompromising opponents of rebaptism need to give greater consideration to the earthly or human pole of the baptismal event. If *BEM* is correct in saying that 'Baptism is both God's gift and our human response to that gift', does baptism exist if there is no human response? Or is the human response constituted merely by the (passive) receiving of baptism? To p. 342 put it another way, in the language of initiation, is a beginning which has no continuation and leads nowhere a real beginning at all? Do we not gravely devalue

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[28] However, recent correspondence with Principal Martin Cressey of Westminster College, Cambridge, has disclosed that the pressure for rebaptism in congregations of the United Reformed Churches is not related to the URC's 'double-practice' order, but arises especially from charismatic experience (see below).

[29] cf his *One Baptism Once* (*Grove Booklet on Ministry and Worship*, Bramcote, 1978) 61.

Christian baptism if we insist that every baptismal rite, however perfunctorily and unfruitfully and unbelievingly received, must bear the full weight of the great New Testament theology of baptismal incorporation in Christ?

On the other hand, counter arguments lie ready to hand. It is disturbing that behind such a pursuit of rebaptism there often lurks an unhealthy preoccupation with giving expression to one's own experience rather than humbly recognizing the marvel of God's electing grace, when he set his love upon us in Christ before the world began, and of all he accomplished for us in Christ without our knowledge and before our hearts ever consciously opened to his love. Moreover, in the pastoral context, the lines must be exceedingly difficult to draw, although in the last resort we must not let this 'thin end of the wedge' argument prove decisive.

But we must surely stand firm in resisting requests for a second baptism from those who do not repudiate their first. This would be brazen rebaptism. It often smacks of a safety-first policy ('you can never be too sure …') that is profoundly un-Protestant. You can indeed have too much of a good thing. To grant rebaptism to those who want to feel that they really have done the right thing by the New Testament, beyond the shadow of a doubt, would be a more blatant depreciation of their first baptism than anything we have considered so far. I would therefore support a point that was made in the report on recent discussions between Scottish Baptists and Church of Scotland representatives. They advised Baptist ministers considering requests for a second baptism to point out to the persons concerned that they were in effect denying their first baptism.[30] Objection was taken to this recommendation by some in the Church of Scotland, who were aghast that such a possibility should be even canvassed in a report to which their representatives were party, but I believe it was soundly based.

Much more could be said, and no doubt will be said. May it be said not to score party points off each other, but in an endearour to recover the baptismal grounding of Christian life and church life to which the New Testament bears ample witness. It has long been my conviction, not least as a result of reading in the great Reformers, that evangelical Christians have not faced up to the heavily realistic ways of talking about baptism used by the New Testament writers. p. 343

If more remains to be said, let it also be marked by a readiness to reexamine cherished traditions on all sides. *BEM* addresses sharp questions to practitioners of each of the two main inherited patterns of baptism, in particular, let those who deny the genuineness of baby baptism, yet acknowledge the genuineness of the churches that practise it, ask themselves whether they are not implicated in a deep inconsistency. Above all, let us not acquiesce in our difficulties in giving reality to 'one baptism', whether it is the baptism common to all Christians of Ephesians 4 or the Nicene Creed's once-for-all baptismal response to the gifts of God in the gospel.

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David F. Wright is Lecturer in Ecclesiastical History, New College, Edinburgh. p. 344

[30] Cf *Reports to the General Assembly 1986* [of the Church of Scotland] (Edinburgh, 1986) 311 (para 6.12).