Baptism in the Context of Christian Mission

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One of the fruits of the 'Biblical theology' movement of the past several decades has been a quickened appreciation of the place and meaning of baptism in all of its rich sacramental depth. But by comparison, as actually practised in the empirical life of the churches, baptism all too often appears to have been drained of its New Testament significance. Consequently, baptism is being re-thought today in two contexts.

The first is that of *church renewal.* In this context, critical voices are asking what baptism ought to mean to those inside the churches: Should the churches be content to practise baptism as an undemanding cultural act, a naming ceremony, a kind of civilized tribal initiation rite?[1] How can its authentic Biblical meaning be recovered so that baptism becomes an instrument of church renewal, a 'sign' illuminating the true nature of the Church with all that that implies for the ministries of nurture and *diakonia*? The second is that of *Christian mission.* Here, going beyond the intramural implications of the first context, the question is being asked: What is the place and meaning of baptism to those outside the churches? The central issue is this: Should baptism be dropped because it has become a stumbling block to mission? Or can it be an essential means of witness in the service of mission?

Though the two contexts are by no means unrelated (indeed, renewal and mission go hand in hand), it is my purpose in this paper to concentrate on the place of baptism in the latter context.

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[1] For an articulate example of what I am calling 'intramural' criticism of contemporary baptismal practices, *see* Martin E. Marty, *Baptism* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1960), Marty is one of the American sociological critics whose work has helped to lay the foundations for church renewal by calling into question all statistic-oriented, success-minded, vaguely humanistic and non-Biblical tendencies in American church life. Perhaps it is not out of place to suggest that vigorous, empirical self-criticism among the 'younger' churches would also have its positive results.

I. Baptism as a Problem for Christian Mission

Let us make clear what is at stake.

It is not simply the question of the *tactical legitimacy* of baptism; certainly love may require that a new believer in a non-Christian environment delay or forego baptism if his baptism is likely to cause undue offence or hostility. Nor is it only the question of reforming certain offensive baptismal practices; God help us if we have not left behind all 'forced' baptizing (no matter how subtly induced) as well as mass baptisms for which there is no subsequent ministry of nurture and instruction. These instances demand a strategic re-thinking of baptismal practices; they do not call into question the validity of the act itself.

What rather is at stake is precisely the question of the *theological legitimacy* of baptism. It is true that Protestant Christians at least have never taught the absolute necessity of baptism for salvation.[2] But its place as the usual accompanying sign of the believer's response to God's grace in Christ has been fixed securely in Christian tradition, and its theological validity as an act thoroughly in harmony with the *kerygma* has seldom been questioned. Today, however, with increasing frequency these questions are being put: Has baptism become so over-layered with secondary cultural and theological traditions that it now impedes Christian proclamation?[3] Cannot the hidden Lordship of Christ call forth faith apart from baptism within the framework of non-Christian religions?[4] Does baptism wrongly limit faith in Jesus to those who have been baptized into the institutional Church?

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[2] My own Lutheran tradition, for instance, which has always had about as 'high' an appreciation of baptism as it is possible for a Protestant denomination to have, has never taught that saving faith comes only through the act of baptism. In most editions of the Catechism great emphasis was placed, interestingly enough, on verse 16 of the longer ending of St. Mark which reads: 'He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who believes not will be condemned'; i.e. baptism will follow faith for the believer, but lack of faith, not lack of baptism, leads to condemnation.

[3] Cf. Kaj Baago, 'The Place of Baptism in the Christian Mission in India', *Dialog* (Winter, 1966), pp. 48–50. The burden of Dr. Baago's article is that baptism has indeed become a hindrance to the proclamation of Christ in India, primarily because it has been accepted as the mark of entrance into a different social community, a new religion; and thus it has become a denial of the true universality of the Gospel which makes the believer a follower of Christ but not a member of any particular cultural community or religion. While admitting the truth of the empirical situation Dr. Baago describes in India, I would object that such a view is a distortion of the true meaning of baptism and, furthermore, he seems not to give due weight to the fact that faith always creates a fellowship and is never a purely solitary act. Unfortunately, this article became available to me only after my paper was read at the Tambaram conference.

[4] The basic question posed in another valuable article by Dr. Kaj Baago, 'The Post-Colonial Crisis of Mission', *International Review of Missions* (Vol. LV, July 1966, pp. 322–332).

Here then is the problem which must be faced in considering the place of baptism in the context of Christian mission today. On the one side, Christian institutions, creeds and cultures have a historically-conditioned fluidity. Does baptism belong here, a part of the cultural baggage carried over from Western Christendom, and is it thus non-essential to the proclamation of Christ in non-Western cultures? On the other side, there is an unconditioned centre, a *kerygmatic* unity of Christian faith which, though constantly re-interpreted and adapted to changing cultural situations, has an unyielding, given theological content.[5] Does baptism belong here, and not to the traditions, rites and customs which are a part of Western (or any other) cultural baggage; and does baptism therefore remain an essential means of witness in the service of Christian mission?

The dilemma does not yield a simple answer. But I shall try to state the place of baptism in present-day Christian mission by attempting to survey the boundary between the historically-conditioned in baptism and its *kerygmatic* core.

II. Baptism and the Fluid Elements in Historical Christianity

The development of the historical method, which must now be accepted as the starting point for all exegetical and systematic study of the Christian faith, has revealed how much of what was once considered of the essence of Christianity is, in fact, accidental and relative. Following the lead of Stephen Neill,[6] let me distinguish four categories of such 'fluid' elements.

First, there are varieties of *creeds and confessional statements.* The diversity of dogma, as indeed the diversity of the Biblical record itself, reflects the changing, dynamic, environment-conditioned vitality of the Christian faith. Creeds in themselves do not have an absolute character. They are the situational responses to the *kerygma* and must be re-thought and re-stated for each new time and place.

Similarly, from the very beginning of the Church there has been *institutional* diversity. The search for *the* original Biblical model for church polity is futile; institutional diversity must be understood as the result of situational responses to changing organizational needs. Because institutional forms are inevitable and necessary, simple anti-institutionalism is too

[5] I am not unaware of the difficulty of describing the essential contours of the *kerygmatic* centre of the Gospel. Neither the somewhat factual, historical summary proposed by C. H. Dodd nor the existential interpretation of R. Bultmann are without criticism. However, I would hold that there is a unity, a theological given, a content which makes the Christian Gospel Christian, and I would tend to describe its content along the lines proposed in Part III of this paper.

[6] Stephen Neill, *The Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961).

cheap an answer; because organizational forms may become a demonic seat of unbelief, the search for new forms is a continuing necessity.

Third, there is diversity in *historical traditions.* A single tradition is the historically-conditioned sum of what is unique in a particular denomination or church, reflected in polity, confessions, liturgy, and style of life. No single denominational tradition can embody the whole of Christian experience. A church cannot live only in its traditional past. Thus we are learning today to open ourselves to other traditions and to allow old traditions to be shattered so that creative new forms may emerge.

Finally, the Christian faith has taken root in a variety of *cultures*: Byzantine, Western, Ethiopic, etc. Barth, the Niebuhrs, the American sociological critics and others have made us sharply aware of the danger of identifying Christianity with a particular culture, a criticism informing all contemporary thinking about missions. Still there must be authentic cultural penetration if faith is to be meaningful to secular society. The point is not that Christianity must not be identified with a particular culture; the point rather is that it must not be *absolutely* identified with that culture.

Now to what extent does the sacrament of baptism belong to these fluid elements? It should be quite evident that Christian baptismal practices have been conditioned in a number of directions by secondary cultural and theological traditions.

Let me give three instances of how baptism has been shaped by historically relative credal, institutional and cultural forms. For one, there is no exegetical certainty concerning the question of infant baptism. In the absence of a clear-cut consensus, no single credal affirmation regarding infant baptism is final. Perhaps in the missionary setting baptism should be reserved for adult converts; certainly infant baptism should not be practised apart from a family setting which bears the promise of continuing nurture in the Christian faith. Again, baptism is often interpreted as the ceremony which inducts a person into membership in a particular institutional church. It's not just that, of course; but especially to the outsider it may appear that baptism limits faith to the structures of existing historical traditions. Perhaps we ought to give more weight to the account of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch and explore possibilities for valid baptism apart from our present denominational organizations. Or again, it is not uncommon in a non-Western culture for a convert to assume a 'Christian' (often Westernized) name at his baptism. Robert Ruark, in his novel *Uhuru*, in a passage caustic in criticism of missionaries in Africa, remarks upon the African political leader, '*Matthew* Kamau (real name Kamau wa Muthenge, but mission-named for an apostle by the Catholic fathers who taught him)'. The change of name may indeed be a simple act of piety, a thing not without Biblical precedent;

it may also, of course, imply a subtle rejection of one's own culture, thereby contributing to the impression that Christianity is a 'foreign' faith. Perhaps the early Polynesian converts of Hawaii set a better example when, in assuming Biblical names as Christians, they used authentic Hawaiian equivalents.

No doubt other examples of secondary cultural and theological accretions could be cited. We ought to subject all historically-conditioned baptismal practices to searching criticism, recognizing that they are non-essential to the Gospel and not hesitating to modify them if they distort or hinder Christian proclamation.

But—and here we come to the crucial question—does baptism belong wholly to these fluid elements? Is it to be classed with food laws, Sabbath observances, circumcision, diverse liturgical practices, and other rites which Christianity has rightfully left behind on the principle of Christian freedom? My answer: quite clearly not. Despite credal differences and varieties of traditional practices, we must locate baptism elsewhere. Behind all secondary elements, there is that in baptism which belongs to the *kerygmatic* centre of Christian faith and which cannot be dropped except at the risk of distortion to the Gospel itself.

III. Baptism as a Clue to what is Central in the Christian Faith

What we must do is to reach behind the secondary, culturally-conditioned strata of baptismal practices and interpretations to its New Testament meaning.[7] Baptism embodies the *kerygma.* It is a faithful summary of the Gospel as a whole, a proper clue to the specific *kerygmatic* (theological) content of faith in Christ. This becomes clear if we examine baptism from the standpoint of four of its central motifs.

A. *Baptism and the Christian Doctrine of Man.*—Baptism in the New Testament and the early Church is always an act of initiation. The force of this meaning is summarized by two anthropological images closely associated with the *kerygma* in general and baptism in particular: *new birth* and *new being.* These images do not imply initiation into a new stage of life or into a changed cultural community. They rather speak of baptism as the mark of conversion from self to Christ and from an old way of life to a completely new existence.

Various New Testament pictures enrich the initiatory character of baptism. One of the most powerful is the indirect

[7] It should be stated that there are varieties of baptismal practices and signs of development of baptismal theology even within the New Testament itself. The following four points, I feel, represent what could be called the emergent consensus about the meaning of baptism in the context of the first century.

sacramental theology of the Fourth Gospel.[8] The 'living', life-giving water of which the Fourth Gospel speaks bears this analogy: Just as God brought order out of the chaos of water at the beginning and breathed life into original man, so in baptism man is reborn of 'water and the Spirit' (John 3:5). Hence baptism is man's departure out of the chaos of life apart from Christ into the new order of the authentic life in Christ. The same imagery appears to underlie Tit. 3:5, 'the washing of regeneration and the renewal of the Holy Spirit'.

All modern faiths stand or fall on the doctrine of man. Some forms of modern humanism are totally optimistic about the future of man and his ability to work out his own salvation. Such hope seems misplaced today, to say the least. Other modern faiths have succumbed to cynical pessimism, treating man as a cipher, a tool, a part of the mass. The 'realism' of Biblical faith rejects both these extreme alternatives. It understands man as created in the image of God and hence endowed with great possibilities; but yet as a rebellious sinner whose selfish pride marks his destruction, and who needs a new birth to realize his authentic life.[9] Such realism is basic to the *kerygma* and central to the New Testament doctrine of baptism.

B. *Baptism and the Christian Doctrine of Grace.*—Baptism in the New Testament is always an act of God which calls forth the believer's response of faith. Baptism is incorrectly understood only as a mark of man's decision. As such, baptism capsulizes the Biblical understanding of grace (John 1:12).

Again, several Biblical pictures enrich this motif. One is forgiveness and purification connected with baptism.[10] Another is the image of baptism as a new Exodus, implied in Luke 12:50 and the following narrative in which the passion/resurrection of Jesus corresponds to the Red Sea deliverance.[11] Still another is Mark's conception of the passion as a baptism, that is, as a new act of God's redemption.[12]

Baptism is thus a witness to the particularism of God's grace in Jesus Christ. It is a misreading of both the New Testament evidence and early Church history to say that Jesus made no exclusive claims. He preached the absolute kingdom of God, the in-breaking of God's final, eschatological rule. As a sacrament, then, baptism is an enacted form of the *kerygma*, a

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[8] *See* John 3:1 ff., 4:14, 6:35, 7:37 ff.

[9] J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine* (London: Fontana Books, 1958), draws out the implications of these alternatives in his discussion of the Christian doctrine of man and sin.

[10] Acts 3:38; cf. Tit. 3:5.

[11] In Luke 9:31, the evangelist, alone of all the synopticists, has Jesus speaking of his coming passion as an 'Exodus'. Taken together with Luke 12:50, where the passion is described (as in Mark) as a 'baptism', we find that St. Luke presents a well-developed New Exodus theology, complete with the deliverance (resurrection) and a corresponding 'forty' period following the time of deliverance.

[12] Mark 10:38.

demonstration of what God has done and still does for our salvation.[13]

C. *Baptism and Newness of Life.*—Baptism in the New Testament witnesses to a third central *kerygmatic* motif: through baptism the believer shares the risen life of Christ.

The relationship between baptism and ethics is brought out most strongly in Rom. 6:1–11. There Paul employs the imagery of baptism as a death and resurrection: the sinful man dies and is buried with Christ and is raised to 'walk in newness of life'. Another Pauline image connected to baptism is his phrase, 'to put on Christ', a picture with strong ethical imperative for unity[14] and moral integrity.[15]

The Christian ethic is contextual to the core. There is no new law, no set ethical response. At the centre, God's act of love and new creation challenge the believer to a life of freedom, a freedom informed and motivated by the absolute covenant-love of God in Christ. The pattern of the Christian ethic is shaped by the tension between gift and response, God's act and man's decision. To relax the tension is to distort the *kerygma*: the neglect of God's motivating, initiating act of grace leads to non-Biblical moralism; the slighting of human responsibility obliterates the ethical imperative which follows the indicative of grace. Christian baptism recapitulates exactly the ethical pattern of the *kerygma*. As a sacramental sign, it embodies the tension between the fixed, generating love of God which calls man to disciplined love and the fluid, contextual character of Christian freedom. Baptism, for the Christian, should be a life-long reminder of both the dangers of moralism (i.e. ethics without grace) and of unreflective culture faith (i.e. religion without disciplined commitment).

D. *Baptism and the Church.*—Baptism in the New Testament is never a solitary act. Baptism always results in the creation of a new fellowship, a new community, the Church. The basic picture is Paul's sentence, 'We were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greek, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit'.[16] While the image 'one body' does not imply entry into a different religious community (at least in the sense in which Barth is so critical of the term 'religion'), it does mean that the Christian faith is a shared faith.

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[13] It is in the idea of the 'acting' God wherein lies both the continuity and discontinuity of the New Testament with the Old Testament, and the origin of so-called '*Heilsgeschichte*'. *Heilsgeschichtliche* theology, while open to certain criticism and cultures as the sphere of God's rule, nevertheless does define with accuracy the redemptive particularism of the *kerygma*. Such particularism hardly denies the universal character of the Gospel; it provides the basis for a truly universal mission. All cultural and religious pride is a wrong-headed understanding of the *kerygma*.

[14] Gal. 3:36-37.

[15] Col. 3:5 ff.

[16] 1 Cor. 12:12-13. Cf. Eph. 1:22-23, 2:19–22 for similar emphasis on the Church as the called-out, redemptive community.

The relationship between baptism and the Biblical doctrine of the Church presents a difficult problem for Christian mission. In its New Testament sense, baptism is clearly not the entry point into an institutional community like historic 'Christendom', the 'placed Christianity' of which Martin Marty is so critical.[17] Empirically, however, this is precisely how baptism is often practised and understood. Should baptism therefore be dropped because it has acquired, empirically, such a wrong-headed image?[18] I think not. Baptism is an essential witness to the nature of the Church, not as a cultural community but as the redemptive community. To drop baptism in the context of mission would be to blur the Biblical meaning of the Church. Because the Church is always a dynamic fellowship of those who have been called as God's own congregation, it is difficult to see how true faith can remain hidden within the framework of another religion. The old distinction between the true 'invisible' and the compromised 'visible Church' has rightly been questioned today because it denied too much on the 'visible' side. God's people are always visible in the world, never completely hidden, always gathered for the scattering task of mission.

Examination of the preceding motifs, therefore, shows that at four essential points the sacrament of baptism coincides with and recapitulates the *kerygma.* Baptism is a window to the central meaning of the Christian faith, a 'means of grace' in the fullest sense of that term. It is not the only means of grace, of course: the Word of God may create faith wherever it is heard and proclaimed, within or without the structures of the organized churches. But we must not lightly reject the sacrament of baptism, either as a sacrament within the Church or as an instrument of witness to the world, because, in a sense, baptism *is* the Gospel. Perhaps the real reason why baptism seems to be a stumbling-block to mission today is not because the one or another of the secondary culturally-conditioned baptismal practices have misstated its essential meaning, but because the *kerygma,* as reflected in the theology of baptism, is itself an unavoidable stumbling-block. The Christian doctrine of *man,* with its call for repentance, forgiveness and renewal; the Biblical concept of *grace,* with its emphasis on God as the actor and initiator of salvation; Christian *ethics,* with their tension between the generating love of God and the disciplined, difficult imperative of love; and the doctrine of the *Church,* the new people of God given a mission to the world—all this forms a given theological content which often stands in contrast and conflict with modern secular faiths.

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[17] Martin E. Marty, *Second Chance for American Protestants* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

[18] Cf. The suggestion of Kaj Baago, 'The Place of Baptism in the Christian Mission in India', *Dialog, op. cit.*

IV. The Place of Baptism in Christian Mission

To summarize: I have argued that we must distinguish between that which is secondary and that which is central in the sacrament of baptism. The secondary elements are to be discerned amid the diversity of baptismal practices as historically-conditioned accretions of credal, institutional, traditional and cultural forms. They can and must be subject to criticism, change and modification in the interest of making clear the central theology of Christian baptism, a theology which brings us near to the heart of the Gospel itself.

What then is the place and meaning of baptism in the context of present-day Christian mission? I make three final observations.

First, we rejoice in the heightened feeling of openness, love and humility which characterizes Christian mission today. We must never allow the practice of baptism to impede dialogue. We must therefore reject all offensive baptismal practices and, in particular, put down the idea that baptism brings the believer into a Western or alien cultural community. Baptismal practices must be brought into harmony with *kerygmatic* baptismal theology of the New Testament. In short, love must guide the practice of baptism.

Second, baptism can be used as an instrument of renewal within the churches. The fact of the believer's baptism should raise the 'Who am I?' question: what does it mean to live under grace as a member of God's people? Do the churches in our midst reflect the unity of spirit, the disciplined obedience and the compulsion for mission which baptism proclaims? The ministry of Christian nurture has a powerful starting point in baptism, a starting point too often neglected in our efforts for renewal.

Third, baptism can prepare the way for genuine missionary dialogue by helping us focus upon what is essential and central in the Christian faith. Mission demands theological depth. Unless participants in dialogue engage each other at the point of their respective generating centres of faith, religious authenticity will be stifled.[19] Hindu meets Christian and the Protestant encounters Roman Catholic only when each partner in dialogue exposes himself to what is central in his own and the other's faith, even if the differences cannot be harmonized. Paradoxically, to begin dialogue at some point other than the theological centres of the faiths involved results in fewer, not more, moments of genuine encounter. Baptism helps us fasten upon what is central in the Christian faith, and thereby can become a powerful means of witness in the context of Christian mission.

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[19] Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1955), makes this point in his excellent account of religious pluralism in the U.S.A.