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# The Evangelical sacrament: *baptisma semper reformandum*

**Anthony R. Cross**

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## I. Introduction\*

Whether it is infant baptism or believer's baptism, there's something very unsatisfactory about the theology and practice of baptism in the contemporary church. This is a bold statement, certainly, but one which, I believe, the study of baptism over the last hundred years warrants.

In terms of systematic theology, in the late 1930s and early 1940s first Emil Brunner then Karl Barth dismantled the theological defence of infant baptism, yet both were unwilling to abandon it.<sup>1</sup> Then, in the late 1950s and early 60s, Joachim Jeremias sought to demonstrate the biblical and historical bases for infant baptism, but his arguments were, to the satisfaction of most scholars, successfully refuted by Kurt Aland.<sup>2</sup> This seemed to support the conclusion that 'From the earliest times infant baptism has been a practice in search of a theology; [and that] in many quarters it is still so to-day.'<sup>3</sup>

\* This paper is dedicated in loving memory to Professor David F. Wright (1937-2008), without whose research on the subject the study of baptism would be the poorer.

1 See E. Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter* (London: SCM Press, 1944); K. Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* (London: SCM Press, 1948).

2 See J. Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (London: SCM Press, 1960), and *The Origins of Infant Baptism* (London: SCM Press, 1963); K. Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptise Infants?* (London: SCM Press, 1963). On this debate, see David F. Wright, *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective: Collected Studies* (Studies in Christian History and Thought; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), *passim*.

3 N. Clark, 'The Theology of Baptism', in A. Gilmore (ed.), *Christian Baptism: A Fresh Attempt to Understand the Rite in Terms of Scripture, History, and Theology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1959), 320. The paedobaptist David F. Wright agrees with this assessment, see *Infant Baptism*, 28-29, 272-73. In his *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism?: An Enquiry at the End of Christendom* (Didsbury Lectures; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 8-9, Wright has shown that one of the weaknesses of infant baptism is that it early on adopted the theology and practice of faith-baptism. Cf. 46-47: 'Not far short of a millennium after infant baptism became the more or less universal form of baptism in the West, infants were still being baptized by an awkward adaptation of a rite formulated for the baptism of responding believers – and long after the use of that order of service for persons speaking for themselves had fallen into desuetude.'

This comment was made by Neville Clark, himself a British Baptist theologian, who, after critically discussing the weaknesses of infant baptism, went on to state that such criticisms carry with them 'no sweeping endorsement of Baptist practice' for '[h]ere also, confusion reigns'.<sup>4</sup> Among Baptists the dominant understanding of baptism is that it is a symbol, a public act which witnesses to what God has done in a believer's life, a testimony to an already existing faith from which it is separated in time (often by a considerable length of time, sometimes by decades), an act of obedience and a following of Christ's example. The majority of Baptists speak of it as an ordinance and strongly repudiate that it is a sacrament in any way, while few of those who do employ sacramental language marry this to a sacramental practice of baptism.<sup>5</sup> Baptists have been strongest on the subjects and mode of baptism, but weakest on what baptism actually means.

Another important point which needs to be made is that there is no single theology or practice of infant baptism. Paul K. Jewett observes that 'a closer examination reveals that the thinking of the Paedobaptists themselves, from the very beginning of the Reformation, is...split by a difference of opinion...[which] involves the whole theology of the sacrament of initiation'.<sup>6</sup> This can be seen by a comparison of the teaching on infant baptism by Luther and the Reformed tradition,<sup>7</sup> the latter of which itself can be divided further into the opinions of Zwinglians, Calvinists and Anglicans.<sup>8</sup> However, it is equally clear that Baptists

also do not have a single theology or practice, for within their own ranks they too evince theologies and practices of baptism.<sup>9</sup>

Baptism should be of more concern to Evangelicals and Baptists than it is, for both claim that their faith and practice is rooted in scripture.<sup>10</sup> However, studies on baptism continue to remain few and far between, particularly when compared to the volume of works on the eucharist, and there continues to be a reluctance to explore this subject.<sup>11</sup>

So what option is there? The answer is given by George Beasley-Murray. Many

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Zwingli's Baptismal Theology' and P. Stephens, 'Zwingli's Sacramental Views', both in E. J. Furcha and H. W. Pipkin (eds), *Prophet, Pastor, Protestant: The Work of Huldrych Zwingli after Five Hundred Years* (Pittsburgh Theological Monographs, n.s.; Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 1984), 71-87 and 155-69; on Calvin, see, e.g., R. S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1953), F. Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of his Religious Thought* (The Fontana Library: Theology and Philosophy; London: Collins, 1963), 312-29, T. H. L. Parker, *Calvin: An Introduction to his Thought* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 147-53, P. A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 242-63; on the Anglican Reformers, see, e.g., G. W. Bromley, *Baptism and the Anglican Reformers* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1953), and P. E. Hughes, *Theology of the English Reformers* (Abington, PA: Horseradish, rev. and expanded edn, 1980).

9 See Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists*, 455. The two obvious different theologies of baptism held by Baptists are the anti-sacramental and sacramental views, on which see below.

10 During this paper discussion alternates between the Baptists in particular and Evangelicals more widely. That this alternation is warranted is supported by the observation that both Baptists and Evangelicals base their beliefs and practices on scripture. For Baptists, see, e.g., the first Baptist Declaration of Principle of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, 'That our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ...is the sole and absolute authority in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures...'; for Evangelicals, see, e.g., 'The Evangelical Alliance Basis of Faith', whose second article asserts, 'The divine inspiration of the Holy Scripture and its consequent entire trustworthiness and supreme authority in all matters of faith and conduct.' It should further be noted that while 'Baptist(s)' is used throughout this paper there are many other 'baptist' traditions other than those denominated 'Baptists' and that what is argued here equally applies to many of these. However, to use 'B/baptist(s)' is simply too cumbersome. See on this, J. W. McClendon, Jr, *Systematic Theology: Volume 1. Ethics* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 19-20; and Jonathan H. Rainbow, "'Confessor Baptism": The Baptismal Doctrine of the Early Anabaptists', in T. R. Schreiner and S. D. Wright (eds), *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2006), 203-205.

11 E.g., the InterVarsity Press, both in the US and UK, 'have generally steered clear of books on baptism since we prefer not to take sides on the issue', Daniel G. Reid, Senior Editor, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, USA, in a personal email, 21 September 2004 (though he proceeded to note the occasional recent exceptions to this in L. J. Vander Zee's *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper: Recovering the Sacraments for Evangelical Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), and a forthcoming volume *Baptism: Three Views*).

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He, however, defends the legitimacy of infant baptism on other grounds, see *passim*, but e.g., 80-82, and *Infant Baptism*, 374-76. Cf. N. P. Williams, *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin: A Historical and Critical Study* (London: Longmans, Green, 1929), 550, who summarizes his study as demonstrating that 'the New Testament references to Initiation assume that its recipients are adults', nevertheless, 552, 'the legitimacy and laudability of Paedo-baptism' rests upon 'the argument *a praxi ecclesiae*', the actual practice of the church.

4 Clark, 'Theology of Baptism', 325.

5 See A. R. Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 3; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 99-100, 343-45, 455-56.

6 P. K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 78.

7 On Luther, see, e.g., P. Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 345-74, B. Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 298-305, and J. D. Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther* (Leiden: E. J. Brill Academic, 2001); on the Reformed tradition, see, e.g., H. O. Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), and J. W. Riggs, *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: An Historical and Practical Theology* (Columbia Series in Reformed Theology; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

8 On Zwingli, see, e.g., W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Huldrych Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 180-217, and *Zwingli: An Introduction to His Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 76-93, U. Gäbler, *Huldrych Zwingli: His Life and Work* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 125-31, and T. George, 'The Presuppositions of

times throughout his writings Beasley-Murray refers to Baptist criticisms of other traditions whose baptismal theology does not accord with New Testament teaching, but he then rightly notes that doing such a thing carries with it the requirement that Baptists themselves also test their beliefs and practices at the bar of the word of God. For instance:

have not we Baptists a duty to set our own house in order? For too long we have regarded it as our vocation to demonstrate *who* are the proper recipients of baptism, but have been unable to supply a coherent account from the Scriptures of *what* that baptism is that must be administered to the right persons. Anyone acquainted with our churches knows that there exist in them traditions as stereotyped as can be found in any other churches, and we are dangerously near to mistaking our own popular traditions for the Word of God as are the rest. We Baptists pride ourselves on being churches of the New Testament. It behooves us to take our own medicine – to cast aside our pride, *search afresh the Scriptures*, submit ourselves to their teaching, and be prepared for *reform according to the Word*.<sup>12</sup>

Both infant baptists and believer baptists tend to be inherently conservative and, like Brunner and Barth, resist attempts at baptismal reform. However, from the Baptist perspective, the prevailing individualistic and merely symbolic view of baptism has come under sustained criticism from some of the Baptists' leading scholars. In Britain, these scholars include H. Wheeler Robinson, George Beasley-Murray, R. E. O. White and Neville Clark, and, more recently, Paul Fiddes and John Colwell.<sup>13</sup> The challenge they present us, based on the study of

12 G. R. Beasley-Murray, 'Baptism in the New Testament', *Foundations* 3 (January, 1960), 30, italics added. This call for the reform of Baptist baptismal theology has more recently been sounded by Timothy George, 'The Reformed Doctrine of Believers' Baptism', *Interpretation* 47.3 (July, 1993), 242-55, who states that 'The recovery of a robust doctrine of believers' baptism can serve as an antidote to the theological minimalism and atomistic individualism that prevail in many credobaptist churches in our culture. Baptism is not only the solemn profession of a redeemed sinner, our "appeal to God for a clear conscience," as the New Testament puts it (I Pet. 3:21); it is also a sacred and serious act of incorporation into the visible community of faith. Such an understanding of baptism *calls for the reform of our baptismal practice* at several critical points' (italics added); and Tom Schreiner, 'Baptism in the Epistles', in Schreiner and Wright (eds), *Believer's Baptism*, 95 n. 67: '...Baptists also need to continually reform their practice according to the word of God'. Rainbow, "Confessor Baptism", 205, calls for 'baptists to recover a full-bodied doctrine of baptism instead of the minimalistic view that is often heard in baptist circles today'.

13 For a discussion of contemporary Baptist scholars advocating a sacramental theology set within the context of a broader move which he labels 'Catholic Baptists', see Steven R. Harmon, *Towards Baptist Catholicity: Essays on Tradition and the Baptist Vision* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 27; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 1-21. As well as other works cited elsewhere in this lecture, see also the two collections of essays edited by A. R. Cross and P. E. Thompson, *Baptist Sacramentalism* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 5; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003) and *Baptist Sacramentalism 2* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 25; Milton Keynes:

scripture, theology and history, is that the Baptist (and by extension Evangelical) understanding of baptism needs reforming, a reform which, I believe, leads us to the Evangelical sacrament.

## II. 'Evangelical' and 'sacrament' defined

A few comments, first of all, need to be made regarding the main title of this lecture, 'The Evangelical Sacrament'. It is intentionally ambiguous. 'Evangelical' identifies the position from which I write, namely that movement which arose in the eighteenth century, whose leading principles have been identified by David Bebbington as fourfold: 'There are...four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.'<sup>14</sup> 'Evangelical' also has the adjectival meaning 'of the gospel', for, as we shall see, in the New Testament baptism was an integral part of the kerygma, the earliest Christians' proclamation of the good news, and was the occasion of a person's initial and initiating response to that gospel.

The term 'sacrament' is a contentious one. On the whole Evangelical Baptists have rejected its use, though Stanley K. Fowler has shown that from their origins in the seventeenth century there have always been Baptist sacramentalists.<sup>15</sup> For many, 'sacrament' is inextricably bound up with the theory of baptismal regeneration,<sup>16</sup> a connotation increasingly identified with infant baptism from the

Paternoster, 2008). For those works not discussed by Harmon or elsewhere in this paper, see H. W. Robinson, *Baptist Principles* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 3rd edn, 1938, 1960 reissue [4th edn]), and the full discussion of his theology and many writings on the subject in A. R. Cross, 'The Pneumatological Key to H. Wheeler Robinson's Baptismal Sacramentalism', in Cross and Thompson (eds), *Baptist Sacramentalism*, 151-76; N. Clark, *An Approach to the Theology of the Sacraments* (Studies in Biblical Theology, 17; London: SCM Press, 1956); and S.K. Fowler, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 2; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), 89-97, and 107-13, 121-24, on Robinson and Clark respectively.

14 D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-3. They are more fully discussed in 2-17.

15 Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*. See also, A. R. Cross, 'The Myth of Baptist Anti-Sacramentalism', in P. E. Thompson and A. R. Cross (eds), *Recycling the Past or Researching History? Studies in Baptist Historiography and Myths* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 11; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 128-62.

16 However, see my forthcoming paper 'Baptismal Regeneration: Rehabilitating a Lost Dimension of New Testament Baptism', in Cross and Thompson (eds), *Baptist Sacramentalism 2*, which shows that, while a minority, some of the Baptists' leading scholars (e.g., Thomas Grantham and Benjamin Keach in the seventeenth century) have recognized the biblical relationship between faith, baptism and regeneration. For an earlier argument for an *Evangelical* case for baptismal regeneration (i.e., biblically-theologically understood), see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New*

time that it became the baptismal norm from the fifth century onwards. Baptism and Evangelical mistrust of the word was further intensified with the rise of the Oxford Movement in the early-mid nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup> However, there is no agreed definition of the term ‘sacrament’ and it remains a useful one for us to use, particularly when the meaning attached to it is carefully set out. The recent collection of essays entitled *Baptist Sacramentalism* notes that ‘most Baptists have been happy to accept the definition of sacraments as “means of grace”’;<sup>18</sup> a term which Clark Pinnock defines as ‘media that transmit the grace of God’,<sup>19</sup> while John Colwell states, ‘Baptism is a means of...grace; it does not effect...grace; but it is the ordained means through which this grace is effected.’<sup>20</sup>

But some may oppose the term ‘sacrament’ on the grounds that it is not a biblical one – but then neither is ‘Trinity’, but this doesn’t stop it from denoting God. What matters for Evangelicals is not whether a word is biblical or not, but that the meaning it conveys is consonant with biblical theology. The question

that now arises is whether the ascription ‘the Evangelical sacrament’ can be justified for baptism.

### III. Faith-baptism

As we have already noted, the general emphasis of Baptists on the value of baptism is that it is primarily a confession of a believer’s faith, which is normally held to make no difference to the condition of the baptized person, as its virtue lies in the expression of spiritual realities already appropriated. Baptism is, therefore, understood to be our act for God, our response to a salvation already given by God and received in faith. But while he does not deny the confessional nature of baptism, Beasley-Murray stresses that this confessional dimension is a secondary, not primary, meaning of the rite, and that, quite simply, such views are impossible to square with what the New Testament teaches. He observes, ‘In every explicit mention of Baptism [in the New Testament] it is regarded as the supreme moment of our union with Christ in His redemptive acts for us and our consequent reception of the life of the Spirit.’<sup>21</sup>

In the New Testament it is clear that baptism was a part of the kerygma, the apostolic preaching of the gospel.<sup>22</sup> This is nowhere clearer than in Acts 2.38

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*Testament* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1972 [1963]), 278, who notes that ‘baptismal regeneration’ is frequently understood in attachment to the *ex opere operato* view of baptism. In contrast, however, the New Testament writers ‘think of baptism in terms of grace and faith – always grace, always faith’. He then notes that for ‘Paul baptism witnesses to a rising from the dead (Rom. 6.1ff, Col. 2.12), the reception of the Spirit (1 Cor. 12.13), life in Christ (Gal. 3.27), which involves the believer in participation in the new creation (2 Cor. 5.17); the believer puts on the “new man” (Col. 3.9ff), which is the new nature bestowed through union with the Second Adam, thus again signifying the life of the new creation. *What is all this but “regeneration” under different images?* It is the reality without the word. The reality and the word come together in Tit. 3.5ff’ (italics added). See Beasley-Murray’s discussion of regeneration and especially Tit. 3.5, *passim*; and R. H. Stein, ‘Baptism in Luke-Acts’, in Schreiner and Wright (eds), *Believer’s Baptism*, 46 n. 25, who similarly argues that passages such as Acts 22.16, Eph. 5.26, Tit. 3.5, Heb. 10.22 and 1 Cor. 6.11, ‘when taken at face value, all suggest that the experience of regeneration by the Holy Spirit takes place at conversion when people repent, believe, confess Christ, and are baptized’.

17 Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done?*, 87-88: ‘A certain anti-sacramentalism, or at least disinterest in the sacraments, has characterized too much evangelicalism, often as a reaction against an intolerably high sacramental theology, of the kind associated in the Anglican tradition with the Tractarians’ Oxford Movement or with Anglo-Catholicism in general.’ On the Baptist reaction against the Tractarians, see M. J. Walker, *Baptists at the Table: The Theology of the Lord’s Supper amongst English Baptists in the Nineteenth Century* (Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1992), e.g., 84-120; J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century* (A History of the English Baptists, 3; Didcot: Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 223-27; and Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists*, 9-11.

18 A. R. Cross and P. E. Thompson, ‘Introduction’, in Cross and Thompson (eds), *Baptist Sacramentalism*, 3.

19 C. H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 122.

20 J. E. Colwell, *Promise and Presence: An Exploration of Sacramental Theology* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 113-14. Cf. 133: ‘Baptism is a sacrament; it is a means of grace; it is a human event through which a divine event is promised to occur.’

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21 G. R. Beasley-Murray, ‘The Sacraments’, *The Fraternal* 70 (October, 1948), 3.

22 In his classic study of the kerygma, C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1936), 23, notes ‘the *kerygma* always closes with an appeal for repentance, the offer of forgiveness and of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of “salvation”...’, though he only mentions baptism in the context of Acts 2.38-39 as an example of the *kerygma*. It is clear, however, from the accounts in the book of Acts that baptism was an integral part of the proclamation of the early church and the response of those responding to that gospel ‘appeal’. For inclusion of baptism within the primitive kerygma, discussed in relation to Dodd’s work, see D. Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 736-37. E. J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Volume 2. Paul and the Early Church* (Leicester: Apollos, 2004), 1562-63, states that Peter’s Pentecost sermon ‘summarizes the basic points of the message that Peter and his fellow apostles preached to Jewish audiences’, and that ‘Salvation is tied to baptism “in the name of Jesus Christ”...’ (1563). That the gospel, and baptism’s place within it, was the same when proclaimed to Gentiles is reflected in Stein’s observations, ‘Baptism in Luke-Acts’, 58 n. 46: ‘The eunuch’s question in 8:36 assumes that the command to be baptized was an integral part of Philip’s gospel message in 8:35, just as it was in Peter’s Pentecost message (2:38), Ananias’s message to Paul (9:17-19; 22:13-16), Peter’s message to Cornelius (10:47-48), Paul’s message to the Philippian jailor (16:31-32), and to Crispus (18:8).’ Recognition of the place of baptism within the kerygma has led many scholars to agree with James D. G. Dunn, e.g., ‘Baptism and the Unity of the Church in the New Testament’, in M. Root and R. Saarinen (eds.), *Baptism and the Unity of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans/Geneva: WCC, 1998), 90: ‘Overlap anomalies like the Ephesian disciples aside (Acts 19:1-7), we know of no unbaptized Christians even in the first generation of Christianity.’ Also, Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 94-95: ‘it cannot be without influence...that the tradition of an administration of baptism in the earliest days of the Christian community is taken for granted by Paul. The Apostle himself

when Peter replies to the crowd's question, 'What should we do?', by instructing them, '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.' Later in Acts it is clear that baptism continued to be an integral part of the early church's proclamation of the gospel for this was the response of hearers, whether it be the first Samaritan believers (Acts 8.12-13), the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8.36-38), Saul (Acts 9.17-18), Lydia and her household (Acts 16.14-15), the Philipian jailer and his household (Acts 16.31-33) and so on. The earliest baptism was, therefore, immediate baptism.<sup>23</sup>

Baptism was also intimately connected to the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Spirit (Acts 2.38), union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6.3-9), incorporation into the body of Christ, the church (1 Cor. 12.13), and regeneration (Tit. 3.5). In fact, 1 Peter 3.21 goes so far as to say 'And baptism...now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.' But for many, Baptists and Evangelicals alike, this is going too far and ascribing to baptism what can only be ascribed to faith. But this is to make a number of inter-related mistakes and ignores what the New Testament actually teaches.

We can better understand New Testament baptism when we recognize that it is faith-baptism. But the problem for many is that this seems to suggest that something other than faith is necessary and suggests a form of works salvation. But this is to misunderstand the relationship between faith and baptism in the New Testament.

Evangelicals rightly see that people are saved by grace through faith (e.g.,

John 3.16; Rom. 5.1; Gal. 3.36; Eph. 2.8) and that faith comes from hearing God's word (Rom. 10.14, 17). Everett Ferguson looks at Ephesians 2.8 ('by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God') and links it with the biblical teaching that faith comes by the hearing of the word, a word that is associated in Hebrews 1.3 with God's power, which is identified with the gospel in Romans 1.16, and the word of the cross in 1 Corinthians 1.18. Ferguson then writes, 'Since faith comes from hearing the word, there is a sense in which one might say that faith is given by God.' He explains,

Nevertheless, faith is not human generated. An individual does not produce faith in him/herself or in another person. Only the word that sets forth the mighty, loving, salvific action of God can do this. God's loving action has always, throughout biblical history, launched faith. *Faith is not faith in faith, but faith in God's action* (Heb. 11:6). Since God supplies the content of faith and the means by which it is created, he is the one who gives faith. He may, furthermore, give the influences that make for receptivity and so prepare for faith (Acts 16:14). On the other hand, God does not directly create the response. He does not give faith to some and withhold it from others. Since the word that produces faith is God's word, God is the ultimate source of faith. The preached word produces faith.

Hence Ferguson's belief that 'The consistent order of conversion is summarized in Acts 18:8, "Many of the Corinthians who heard Paul became believers and were baptized".'<sup>24</sup>

To separate faith and baptism is also an example of driving a wedge between spirit and matter.<sup>25</sup> Such a dualism is a form of gnosticism,<sup>26</sup> and owes more to

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had been baptized and the allusions to baptism in his letters assume that all other Christians have been baptized.' Schreiner, 'Baptism in the Epistles', 68, expresses this succinctly, 'When Paul does refer to baptism, he *assumes* that all believers are baptized' (italics original). Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done?*, 36, extends this beyond the primitive church: 'Early Christianity, and here we move beyond the New Testament into the next four centuries, knew nothing of an unbaptized believer.' In *Infant Baptism*, 261, Wright observes, 'In the congregations of patristic Christianity an unbaptized Christian was an anomaly, if not an impossibility.'

<sup>23</sup> See Dunn, 'Baptism and the Unity of the Church', 93. Similarly, M. Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1970), 185: 'In the early days of the Church, baptism was administered straight away on profession of faith and repentance.' Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done?*, 64, offers what seems to me the most plausible explanation for the discontinuation of the practice of immediate baptism (certainty is not possible as nowhere is a reason given): it 'probably had something to do with the shift in recruitment from Jews to Gentiles, who not only needed basic theistic and ethical instruction which Jewish converts should not have needed but also required purification and release from the defilements of pagan idolatry'. In this he is following J. H. Lynch, *Godparents and Kinship in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 85-87. However, if this is the reason, or part of the reason, for the abandonment of immediate baptism this is not the same as recognizing it as a legitimate development, because the introduction of a period of instruction before baptism, which later developed into the catechumenate proper, altered the nature of conversion itself.

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<sup>24</sup> E. Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 163-64, quotations from 164, italics added. Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.14.17 (trans. H. Beveridge; 2 vols; London: James Clarke, 1949) 503, for whom the purpose of both the word and the sacraments is one and the same, and he does so emphasizing the necessity of faith: 'the office of the sacraments differs not from the word of God' for both 'hold forth and offer Christ to us, and, in him, the treasures of heavenly grace. They confer nothing, and avail nothing, if not received in faith, just as wine and oil...will run away and perish unless there be an open vessel to receive it.'

<sup>25</sup> On the importance of both spirit and matter as media through which God works, see the key essay by Paul S. Fiddes, 'Baptism and Creation', in P. S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 13; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 107-24; but also C. H. Pinnock, 'The Physical Side of Being Spiritual: God's Sacramental Presence', in Cross and Thompson (eds), *Baptist Sacramentalism*, 8-20; A. R. Cross, 'Being Open to God's Sacramental Work: A Study in Baptism', in S. E. Porter and A. R. Cross (eds), *Semper Reformandum: Studies in Honour of Clark H. Pinnock* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 355-77; and Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, ch. 2, 'Sacramentality and the Doctrine of Creation', 42-61.

<sup>26</sup> This point has been developed at length by P. J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, 10, observes, 'evangelicalism suffers from an inherent dualism... Evangelical

Zwinglian thought<sup>27</sup> and Enlightenment empiricism than biblical thought.<sup>28</sup> Colwell notes that ‘One outcome of the Enlightenment’s focus on the sufficiency of individual perception was a prioritizing of the unmediated, of private rationality, of felt experience. And this individualistic emphasis on the unmediated is ubiquitous.’<sup>29</sup> Bebbington has shown that Evangelicalism, at the very least, was deeply influenced by the Enlightenment, if not a child of it,<sup>30</sup> so Evangelicals must ensure that we do not simply imbibe its ways of thinking (cf. Rom. 12.2). As far as generalizations are ever true, Evangelicalism has tended to major on the authority of scripture, its soteriology focusing on the doctrine of the atonement and the necessity of personal conversion,<sup>31</sup> the necessity of evangelism<sup>32</sup> and the need for personal holiness.<sup>33</sup> Yet there are other important doctrines which Evangelicalism needs to integrate within its thought. These include pneumatology (revived within various movements since the Evangelical Revival, but

especially by Pentecostalism and the Charismatic Movement), creation and the incarnation to name but three.

As heirs of the Enlightenment, Evangelicals have a strong tendency to want to be able to understand fully how the spiritual and the material work, how God can give the gift of faith to those who hear his word, written or proclaimed, and how the act of a believer in being baptized can be the occasion when the Spirit is given, sins are forgiven and union with Christ is effected. But, again, the term sacrament proves useful. Many have rightly noted that it is the Latin term used to translate the Greek word *mysterion*, and this element of ‘mystery in the workings of our mighty God is a dimension which Evangelicals need to rediscover.’<sup>34</sup> We cannot explain and understand everything (the felt need to do so is driven by an Enlightenment impulse, I believe) and sometimes we simply need to accept in faith that God works in his ways, and that we are not always privy to his reasons (cf. Isa. 55.8).<sup>35</sup>

In his important book on *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green writes of the New Testament doctrine of baptism that ‘the main point... is the universal and quite unselfconscious link in the early Church between the invisible encounter of man’s faith with God’s grace, and its outward expression in baptism. So far from being in some way antithetical to grace and faith, as much Protestant thought has in the past imagined, baptism is the sacrament of justification by faith’, and he refers to Galatians 3.26-27, ‘You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ’. It is no accident, Green notes, that Romans 6’s discussion of union with Christ in his death and resurrection through baptism follows immediately on from chapter 5’s discussion of justification by faith. He concludes that ‘They belong together. Those who repented and believed the Word were baptized. That was the invariable pattern.’<sup>36</sup>

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theology tends toward a cleavage between the material and the spiritual, the earthly and the heavenly, which I find to be too insensitive to the world as God’s creation and to the incarnation of Jesus Christ into our actual fallen humanity. In this essentially dualistic worldview the sacraments, which by their very nature function through material elements, cannot bear the weight of spiritual reality.’

27 Zwingli’s separation of Spirit and matter is succinctly and critically summarized, along with its implications for Baptist theology, by Rainbow, “Confessor Baptism”, 196-200, 205-206.

28 R. E. O. White, *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960), 262-63, shows how the apostle John, for example, ‘corrects any tendency to undervalue the sacraments as merely ritual, traditional, symbolic or prescribed performances in which nothing of spiritual value or power resides. Given that a real transformation of nature and character by repentance, faith and the regenerating power of the Spirit is involved in baptism...the sacraments have a rightful, valid and necessary place in Christian life... Had John felt free to correct the misinterpretations of his day by dropping the sacraments altogether, and emphasising only the experience of rebirth through the Spirit...then it is probable that such “spiritualised sacramentalism” would have degenerated into a gnostic idealism unrelated to history, and therefore to Jesus’ (italics added).

29 Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, 11-12.

30 As well as Bebbington’s *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, see his ‘Evangelical Christianity and the Enlightenment’, in M. Eden and D. F. Wells (eds), *The Gospel in the Modern World: A Tribute to John Stott* (Leicester: IVP, 1991), 66-78. This view, however, is opposed by, e.g., G. J. Williams, ‘Was Evangelicalism Created by the Enlightenment?’, *Tyndale Bulletin* 53.2 (2002), 283-312.

31 Which, it should be noted, ties in with ecclesiology, that the church is made up of the elect, or, in the Free Churches/believers church tradition, that it is made up of those who profess personal faith in Christ. I would also want to add the doctrine of justification by grace through faith as implicit in this emphasis.

32 These four emphases are identified as characteristic of Evangelicalism by, for example, D. W. Bebbington, ‘Evangelicalism’, in Alister E. McGrath (ed.), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 183.

33 Harriet A. Harris, ‘Evangelical Theology’, in Trevor Hart (ed.), *The Dictionary of Historical Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 198, adds this latter emphasis to those already mentioned by Bebbington.

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34 Cf. R. E. Webber (ed.), *Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail: Why Evangelicals are Attracted to the Liturgical Church* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1985), 21-30. E.g., 22: ‘As I grew up in the Western culture of America and began attending school, the mystery of my childhood was soon replaced by the Western ideal of the explainable. Everything, even religious experience, I learned, was to be subjected to reason, logic, and observation. Claims to mystery, to wonder, and to the experience of things too deep to explain were looked upon as primitive, anti-intellectual, and weak-minded.’

35 There is a dearth of Evangelical studies on the place of baptism within an Evangelical spirituality, and this is an area which hopefully will not remain so neglected for long, especially given the renewed interest in recent years in the subject. See, e.g., I. M. Randall, *Evangelical Experiences: A Study in the Spirituality of English Evangelicalism 1918-1939* (Studies in Evangelical History and Thought; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 1999), esp. ch. 7, ‘Word and Sacraments: The Spirituality of Orthodox Dissent’, 174-205, and *What a Friend We Have in Jesus: The Evangelical Tradition* (Traditions of Christian Spirituality Series; London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2005), ch. 4, “‘Christ in a Real Presence’: The Sacraments”, 59-75; and Molly T. Marshall, *Joining the Dance: A Theology of the Spirit* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2003), 73-83.

36 Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 183 (italics added).

Green is discussing what an increasing number of scholars have come to see as conversion-baptism,<sup>37</sup> or, as James Dunn has termed it, conversion-initiation.<sup>38</sup> For too long Christians, Evangelicals especially, have understood conversion to be punctiliar. This is reflected in the frequently asked question, ‘When did you become a Christian?’ Such a question has caused many problems for those who cannot remember a time when they did not believe in Christ and who cannot put a time or date to their conversion. However, conversion is a process, a journey. The understanding that conversion is punctiliar has caused many hermeneutical problems, particularly raising the question of which is the normative order in the book of Acts? Is it the pattern set out in Acts 2, or chapters 8, 10, 16 or 19?

- repentance, water-baptism, forgiveness and reception of the Spirit (Acts 2.38, 41);
- believing, water-baptism, laying on of hands and reception of the Spirit (Acts 8.12-17);
- reception of the Spirit, speaking in tongues and water-baptism (Acts 10.44-48);
- believing and water-baptism (Acts 16.31-33);
- or believing, water-baptism, laying on of hands, reception of the Spirit and speaking in tongues (Acts 19.1-6. See also 9.17-18 and 22.16)?

But when we recognize conversion as a process, that is, conversion-initiation, such questions lose their relevance as the sovereign activity of the Spirit of God is recognized, along with the probable explanation that Luke is not concerned with providing a pattern of conversion-initiation.

If there is any doubt that New Testament baptism is faith-baptism, then the work of George Beasley-Murray should dispel it once and for all. He observes that ‘the New Testament writers associate the full range of salvation on the one hand with baptism and on the other hand with faith.’<sup>39</sup> This can be set out diagrammatically.

### The gifts promised to faith and baptism

GIFT OF GOD	FAITH	BAPTISM
Forgiveness	Rom. 4.5-7; 1 John 1.9	Acts 2.38; 22.16
Justification	Rom. 3-5 (e.g. 3.28); Gal. 2-3	1 Cor. 6.11
Union with Christ	Eph. 3.17	Gal. 3.27
Being crucified with Christ	Gal. 2.20	Rom. 6.2-11
Death & Resurrection	Rom. 8.12-13	Rom. 6.2-11; Col. 2.12
Sonship	John 1.12	Gal. 3.26-27
Holy Spirit	Gal. 3.2-5 and 14	Acts 2.38; 1 Cor. 12.13
Entry into the church	Acts 5.14; Gal. 3.6-7	Gal. 3.27; 1 Cor. 12.13
Regeneration & Life	John 3.3, 14-16; 20.31	John 3.5; Tit. 3.5
The kingdom & eternal life	Mark 10.15; John 3.14-16	1 Cor. 6.9-11
Salvation	Rom. 1.16; John 3.16	1 Pet. 3.21

Here we see that according to the New Testament the gifts of grace given to faith are also associated with baptism.<sup>40</sup> Forgiveness is promised to faith in Romans 4.5-7 and 1 John 1.9, but to baptism in Acts 2.38 and 22.16. In Romans 3-5 and Galatians 2-3 justification is by faith alone, e.g., Romans 3.28, but in 1 Corinthians 6.11 it is assigned to baptism. In Ephesians 3.17 union with Christ is through faith, while in Galatians 3.27 it is rooted in baptism. In Galatians 2.20 being crucified with Christ is by faith alone, but in Romans 6.2-11 it occurs in baptism. Sharing in Christ’s death and resurrection is by faith in Romans 8.12-13, but in Romans 6.2-11 and Colossians 2.12 it is in baptism. In John 1.12 sonship is promised to faith, but in Galatians 3.26-27 it is related to faith and baptism. In Galatians 3.2-5 and 14 the Spirit is given to faith, but in Acts 2.38 and 1 Corinthians 12.13 to baptism. Entry into the church is by faith in Acts 5.14 and Galatians 3.6-7, but in baptism according to Galatians 3.27 and 1 Corinthians 12.13. Regeneration and life are granted to faith in John 3.3, 14-16 and 20.31, but to baptism in John 3.5<sup>41</sup> and Titus 3.5. The kingdom and eternal life are promised to faith in Mark 10.15 and John 3.14-16, yet in 1 Corinthians 6.9-11 it is given to those who have abandoned the sins that exclude from it, for they have been washed clean in baptism, something also seen in Acts 22.16. Finally, salvation is given to faith in Romans 1.16 and John 3.16, but to baptism in 1 Peter 3.21.

37 For those who accept this, see A. R. Cross, ‘“One Baptism” (Ephesians 4.5): A Challenge to the Church’, in S. E. Porter and A. R. Cross (eds), *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church: Historical and Contemporary Studies in Honour of R. E. O. White* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series, 171; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 173-78.

38 J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today* (London: SCM Press, 1970), 4.

39 G. R. Beasley-Murray, ‘The Authority and Justification for Believers’ Baptism’, *Review and Expositor* 77.1 (1980), 65; also, more recently, recognized by A. N. S. Lane, ‘Baptism in the Thought of David Wright’, *Evangelical Quarterly* 78.2 (April, 2006), 145.

40 This table is a summary of the work in various places of G. R. Beasley-Murray and first appeared in Cross, ‘Being Open to God’s Sacramental Work’, 366 (cf. also Cross, ‘Faith-Baptism: The Key to an Evangelical Baptismal Sacramentalism’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies* 4.3 (May 2004), 16, but see the whole of the essay, 5-21). See also Ferguson *Church of Christ*, 180-95, where he similarly discusses the ‘many key ideas involved in conversion’ which are associated with baptism.

41 While the argument stills continues as to whether John 3.5 is a reference to baptism, it is worth noting that John 3.5 was the favourite baptismal text in the second century. See E. Ferguson, ‘Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 30 (1979), 45 (and n. 1 listing those fathers who used it as such); and Wright, *Infant Baptism*, e.g., 12, 50 and 364.

It is clear, therefore, that God's gift to faith and baptism is one, namely, salvation in Christ. This is what Peter says in 1 Peter 3.21, 'baptism...now saves you'.

But how is it that Peter can say that baptism saves us? The answer lies in understanding how the New Testament sometimes uses the term 'baptism'. James Dunn has led the way in recent years with several studies in which he has argued that many of the New Testament references to baptism are to be understood as metaphorical.<sup>42</sup> But the simple appeal to metaphor does not go far enough. There is a long tradition, going back at least to the Reformers, including Zwingli, Bullinger, Calvin and Beza,<sup>43</sup> which refines metaphor into metonymy. Metonymy is that figure of speech 'in which something is represented by one of its own attributes or aspects'.<sup>44</sup> Larry Shelton quotes the definition of 'A figure of speech in which one word or phrase is substituted for another with which it is closely associated, as in the use of *Washington* for *the United States government* or of *the sword* for *military power*'.<sup>45</sup> In this case the something is becoming a Christian, conversion, represented by part of that process, namely baptism. While I argued for this on several occasions,<sup>46</sup> I now believe that synecdoche is the more

42 E.g., Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, e.g., 109-11, 139-46, and "Baptized" as Metaphor', in Porter and Cross (eds), *Baptism, the New Testament and the Church*, 294-310.

43 Zwingli interpreted a number of references to baptism (1 Pet. 3.20-21; Eph. 5.26; Rom. 6.3-4; Gal. 3.27; Tit. 3.5) as examples of metonymy in his *Original Sin*, in *The Latin Works and the Correspondence of Huldreich Zwingli* (trans. W. J. Hinke; Philadelphia: Heidelberg Press, 1922), 2:28, cited by J. W. Cottrell, 'Baptism According to the Reformed Tradition', in D. W. Fletcher (ed.), *Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1990), 46-47. For references in Bullinger, Calvin and Beza, see J. Pelikan, *Reformation of Church and Dogma (1300-1700)* (The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, 4; Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), 194; H. Bullinger, *Summa of the Christian Religion* 8.8 (Zurich, 1556), 151r, and *Five Decades of Sermons* 5.9 (Zurich, 1552), 368v; J. Calvin, *Replies to Joachim Westphal* 1 (CO 9:36) and *A Clear Explanation of the Sound Doctrine of the True Participation of the Flesh and Blood of Christ in the Holy Supper, in Refutation of the Nebulous Ideas of Heshusius* (CO 9:472); T. Beza, *On the Lord's Supper* 3 (*BezTract* 1:213); *Against Matthias Flacius Illyricus* 4; 10 (*BezTract* 2:128-29; 141).

44 S. I. Wright, *The Voice of Jesus: Studies in the Interpretation of Six Gospel Parables* (Paternoster Biblical Monographs; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2000), 51.

45 R. L. Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 238 n. 52, quoting *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 3rd edn, 1992), no page given.

46 See Cross, "One Baptism" (Ephesians 4.5), 173-209, and the slightly revised version of this, "One Baptism" and Christian Initiation in the Ecumenical Age' (2001) which was published on the 'Baptists Doing Theology in Context: A Continuing Consultation' website, <<http://www.rpc.ox.ac.uk/theology-in-context/papershtml1/cross-a2001.htm>>. Cf. Daniel A. Tappeiner, 'Hermeneutics, the Analogy of Faith and New Testament Sacramental Realism', *Evangelical Quarterly* 49 (1977), 50.

accurate term, though I recognize that metonymy and synecdoche are often regarded synonymously. Stephen Wright defines synecdoche as 'using a word to stand for the *whole* of which the literal referent is only a part, or a *part* of which the literal referent is the whole', adding that 'At its simplest synecdoche is seen in a single word'.<sup>47</sup> Shelton defines synecdoche as 'A figure of speech in which a part is used for the whole (as *hand* for *sailor*), the whole for a part (as *the law* for *police officer*), the specific for the general (as *cutthroat* for *assassin*), the general for the specific (as *thief* for *pickpocket*), or the material for the thing from which it is made (as *steel* for *sword*).'<sup>48</sup>

Recognized as a synecdoche, it is possible for us to understand how Peter can say 'baptism...now saves you'; why Paul includes baptism among the seven unities of the faith in Ephesians 4.5, and in 1 Corinthians 12.13 he says, 'For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body'.<sup>49</sup>

For many Evangelicals this is to claim too much, but it is important to recognize that baptism is not the only example of synecdoche in the New Testament<sup>50</sup> – nor for that matter in Evangelical thought. Its occurrence in the New Testament is noted by Robert Stein:

For Luke 'repentance' is an example of synecdoche in which 'repentance' refers to 'repentance-faith-baptism.' Similarly, 'faith'<sup>51</sup> refers to 'faith-repentance-baptism' and 'baptism' refers to 'baptism-repentance-faith,' i.e., a baptism preceded by repentance and faith. Thus one can refer to becoming a Christian as 'the day they repented,' 'the day they believed,' 'the day they were baptized,' 'the day they confessed Christ,' and 'the day they received the Spirit,' or to use Johannine terminology 'the day they were born

47 Wright, *Voice of Jesus*, 7 and 194, and the whole of his discussion of synecdoche on 193-207.

48 Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 238 n. 52, again citing *The American Heritage Dictionary*, n.p.

49 Schreiner, 'Baptism in the Epistles', 75 n. 23, also accepts that 'many references to baptism are an example of synecdoche where baptism stands for the entire process of Christian initiation'.

50 This should not, therefore, come as a surprise to Evangelicals as it was recognized by John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke and The Epistles of James and Jude* (eds. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance; trans. A. W. Morrison; Calvin's New Testament Commentaries; Eerdmans: Grand Rapids/Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), 3:224, who, on Matt. 28.2, observed, 'we know that instances of synecdoche are frequently to be found in Scripture'.

51 At this point, Stein, 'Baptism in Luke-Acts', 51, adds the note (n. 33) 'how in 4:4; 9:42; 13:12; 14:1; 17:12, 34 the verb "believe" is used to describe becoming a Christian and no mention is made of either repentance, confessing Christ, baptism, or receiving the Spirit [which (38 and 56) he states is the *sine qua non* of being a Christian (cf. Rom. 8.9)]. In these examples "believe" serves as an example of synecdoche and is a shorthand expression for "believed-repentant-confessed Christ-received the Spirit-were baptized.'

again.' All these are interrelated and integral components in the experience of conversion...<sup>52</sup>

Two other familiar examples of synecdoche, which are widely used in an undisputed way by Baptists and Evangelicals, are 'the blood' and 'the cross'. On the former, Shelton mentions Calvin's recognition of this in his commentary on Romans 3.25,<sup>53</sup> while John Armson implicitly uses 'the cross' as a synecdoche when he refers to Alan Sell's 'insisting on the centrality of the Cross in the Christian life – where "Cross" (capital C) is understood not just as a gallows but as a whole complex of thoughts relating to our redemption, rebirth, and sanctification, all of which make this the primary and central Christian truth.'<sup>54</sup>

All this also helps us to understand the various accounts of conversion in the book of Acts and frees us from trying to determine which is the normative order of becoming a Christian.<sup>55</sup> There isn't one, but the Spirit comes to people differently and brings them into God's kingdom by a process which can be long and protracted or swift, even sudden, but which in the New Testament, Robert Stein argues, occurred on the same day.<sup>56</sup> What matters is that people come to new life

52 Stein, 'Baptism in Luke-Acts', 51-52. Cf. 43: 'In describing the reception of the gift of the Spirit, Luke at times singles out only one component of the conversion process. In such instances, however, other components not explicitly mentioned are nevertheless assumed to be included'; and Stein notes (46) that when 'baptism is mentioned and the gift of the Spirit is not' (8.36-39; 16.14-15, 31-34; 18:8) then 'Luke expects his readers to assume in these abbreviated accounts that those baptized had received the Spirit'.

53 Shelton, *Cross and Covenant*, 65-66.

54 J. Armson, review of A. P. F. Sell's *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel: Theological Themes and Thinkers 1550-2000* (Studies in Christian History and Thought; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), in *Reviews in Religion and Theology* 14.1 (January, 2007), 56. See also, e.g., John Bowring's hymn, 'In the cross of Christ I glory'.

55 Acceptance of this supports the contention that conversion is more often a process than punctiliar (though this is not to deny that sometimes such crisis conversions do occur). Cf. I. H. Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 3rd edn, 1988), 199, who comments, 'It is clear that Luke had received several varying accounts of how the Spirit was received by men, but he has not tried to harmonize them and impose a pattern on them... If Luke was wishing to fit the work of the Spirit into a pattern, he had no need to record these anomalous experiences.' Stein, 'Baptism in Luke-Acts', 36: 'Luke's concern in Acts involves not so much explaining the meaning of baptism (contrast Rom 6:1-11) as describing the practice of baptism in the early church. In so doing he shows how it is intimately associated with the conversion-initiation experience of becoming a Christian. When he refers to Christian baptism (and in his Gospel as well), he describes the experience of baptism as it is related to the process of becoming a Christian. In addition, Luke illustrates how in that process repentance, faith, confession of Jesus as Christ and Lord, baptism, and receiving the Spirit are interrelated and are all integral parts of the experience of becoming a Christian.' Cf. his discussion of 'The Multifaceted Nature of the Conversion Experience in Acts', 52-57.

56 However, I would not put it quite as definitively as Stein does here, as I believe that Luke sees Saul's/Paul's conversion as a process, a 'becoming a Christian', beginning at least as he sanctioned and witnessed the martyred of Stephen (Acts 7.58) and

in Christ. F. F. Bruce's comment on Galatians 3.27 brings this all together: 'If it is remembered that repentance and faith, with baptism in water and reception of the Spirit, followed by first communion, constituted one complex experience of Christian initiation, *then what is true of the experience as a whole can in practice be predicated of any element in it*. The creative agent, however, is the Spirit.'<sup>57</sup>

It is for these reasons that a growing number of Evangelical scholars refer to the 'realist language' of baptismal passages such as Acts 2.38, Romans 6.2-11 and Colossians 2.11-12. Writing on Romans 6.3-4, John Colwell observes that

for Paul, baptism is the means through which the Spirit mediates this inclusion in Christ... [T]he sacramental realism of biblical language can only be avoided through extreme special pleading...<sup>58</sup>

David F. Wright agrees:

My concern [is] to convey a sense of the markedly direct terms in which the New Testament documents attribute the multifaceted reception of God's salvation to the instrumentality of baptism. This is what I mean by the strongly realist presentation of baptism in the New Testament. There is not a single text which *prima facie* ascribes to baptism only a symbolical or representational or signifiatory function.<sup>59</sup>

Elsewhere Wright challenges what he calls 'evangelical indifference' to this observation, commenting that 'the New Testament's (and for that matter the Reformation's) baptismal language is much more realist than modern evangelical piety has generally allowed'.<sup>60</sup> Stanley K. Fowler, in his study of four centuries

culminated in his baptism by Ananias (Acts 9.18). Cf. Stein, 'Baptism in Luke-Acts', 58: 'one does not become a Christian in Acts at the minute of faith, or the instant of repentance, or the time of confession, or the moment of baptism, or the point in time when God gave his Spirit. These were not separated in time as in the present day but occurred together, that is, on the same day, and thus "the need to pinpoint exactly when conversion took place and also to identify the normative sequence for the constituent elements of conversion-initiation are obviated"', citing A. R. Cross, 'Spirit- and Water-Baptism in 1 Corinthians 12.13', in S. E. Porter and A. R. Cross (eds), *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies (Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series, 234; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002)*, 133. See also Stein's 'Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament', *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2.1 (Spring, 1998), 6-17.

57 F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1982), 186, italics added.

58 Colwell, *Promise and Presence*, 121, cf. 171 on the eucharist.

59 Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done?*, 91. On 102, he writes of the 'biblically realist understanding of baptism with which Christ furnished his church to mark incorporation into him and his body'. See also, e.g., Tappeiner, 'Hermeneutics, the Analogy of Faith and New Testament Sacramental Realism', 40-55.

60 Wright, *Infant Baptism*, 363-64. On 365, Wright observes that 'The apostolic churches evince a baptismal consciousness rarely to be glimpsed in evangelical churches today.' While he continues 'This is particularly the case in infant-baptizing communions', I believe this equally applies to believer-baptizing churches.

of Baptist sacramental understanding of baptism and the opposition to it, identifies John 3.5, Titus 3.5, Ephesians 5.26 and 1 Corinthians 12.13 as baptismal:

It looks as if these texts are saying that baptism is instrumental in the experience of salvation, i.e., that spiritual rebirth, cleansing from sin, and union with Christ and his church are effects of baptism. That this is the apparent meaning of the texts is evident from the common Baptist attempt to evade this conclusion by interpreting these passages in a non-baptismal sense.<sup>61</sup>

George Beasley-Murray declares, 'I am quite convinced that fresh and prolonged reflection on the Scriptures relating to baptism...would lead the *whole Church* [Baptists included!] to a sounder understanding of the meaning of baptism and the divine intention in giving the ordinance to her.'<sup>62</sup> Tony Lane agrees, asserting that 'Until evangelicals take seriously the clear teaching of the New Testament about the efficacy of baptism, they cannot expect those of other traditions to take them seriously on this topic.'<sup>63</sup>

Taking seriously the theology and practice of New Testament baptism, then, requires that baptism be returned to its biblical place within the preaching of the church and the conversion of sinners, not just on the 'mission field', but within the ongoing life of the church.

It is true that New Testament baptism can still be found in mission contexts, where those responding to the gospel are led by evangelists and missionaries to express their faith and repentance in baptism immediately. However, I believe that the church always exists, and has always existed, in this mission situation. It is widely acknowledged that the churches in the West are in an increasingly secularized society which has led some scholars to speak in terms of post-Christendom.<sup>64</sup> The strength of this perspective is that it reminds us that we are living in times where the church's mission, its participation in the mission of God, is more than slightly reminiscent of the situation in which the earliest Christians lived and witnessed,<sup>65</sup> and therefore opens us to explore the relevance for to-

61 Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, 65. Cf. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 263.

62 G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (London: Macmillan, 1966), 91-92 (italics added), and the whole of his discussion of 'Steps to a Revival of Apostolic Baptism', 89-98; and White, *Biblical Doctrine of Initiation*, 'The Recovery of the Biblical Doctrine', 305-17.

63 A.N.S. Lane, 'Foreword' to Wright's *What has Infant Baptism done?*, viii.

64 Note, e.g., the sub-title of Wright's Didsbury Lectures, *An Enquiry at the End of Christendom*.

65 Cf. A. Kreider, 'Baptism and Catechesis as Spiritual Formation', in A. Walker and L. Bretherton (eds), *Remembering our Future: Explorations in Deep Church* (Deep Church; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2007), 175, who describes post-Christendom as 'an inhospitable place for the church to be', but that it is not one without hope. The church, he believes, will only survive so far as 'it discovers itself to be a "creative minority" that is involved in God's mission.' On the issue of post-Christendom, see also S. Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (After Christendom; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004), and *Church after Christendom* (After Christendom; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2004).

day of the rich resources of the ante-Nicene church – its baptismal theology and practice included.<sup>66</sup> However, I believe that the church has always been in the mission situation in which the first Christians found themselves, and that the Constantinian settlement, and therefore what is called Christendom,<sup>67</sup> has only duped Christians into thinking otherwise.<sup>68</sup> Further, the separation of foreign and home missions, for example, seems often to have led the church to divide what should never be separated, for there is only one gospel (cf. Gal. 1.6-7; 1 Cor. 15.1-2), and this is the same for those in the West and those in the Majority World, the same for Jews and Gentiles,<sup>69</sup> the same for the children of those from credobaptist traditions and those from paedobaptist ones – or any other divisions we might care to think up. Eckhard Schnabel expresses this eloquently:

One tragic result of the Constantinian legalization of Christianity in the fourth century was that the church that baptized exclusively was con-

66 Cf. among many such works, those by R. E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelicalism for a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), and *Ancient-Future Time: Forming Spirituality through the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004); D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), and *Evangelicals and Tradition: The Formative Influences of the Early Church* (Deep Church; Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005); D. H. Williams (ed.), *The Free Church and the Early Church: Bridging the Historical and Theological Divide* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); S. R. Holmes, *Listening to the Past: The Place of Tradition in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

67 As a historian I can speak of Christendom in the sense that following the conversion of Constantine the relationship between the church and state in western Europe was different to that pertaining before it, and remained so for over a thousand years (cf., e.g., the practice of mass conversions, and the place of baptism within these, in the early Middle Ages; see, e.g., Carole M. Cusack, *The Rise of Christianity in Northern Europe, 300-1000* (London: Cassell, 1998), *passim*; and S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (The Pelican History of the Church; London: Penguin, 2nd edn, 1986), *passim*). As a theologian I do not believe that the developments that resulted from it were all legitimate ones. I agree with Tertullian, *Apology* 18, that 'People are not born Christians, they have to be made into Christians', and that they are made Christians by faith in Christ. As an Evangelical I believe this is personal faith as no-one can believe for another, and that this has always been so. Support for the view that Europe was never as Christianized as the term Christendom suggests is found in Anton Wessels' *Europe: Was it Ever Really Christian? The Interaction between Gospel and Culture* (London: SCM Press, 1994), see esp. 3-5.

68 Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done?*, 74, refers to 'a truly massive change in the history of Christ's church. From being a company recruited by intentional response to the gospel imperative to discipleship and baptism, it became a body enrolled from birth. It was arguably one of the greatest sea changes in the story of Christianity. It led...to the formation of Christendom, comprising a Christian empire, Christian nations or peoples. Christianity became a matter of heredity, not decision.'

69 See S. J. Chester, *Conversion at Corinth: Perspectives on Conversion in Paul's Theology and the Corinthian Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2003), 113-204, who shows that Paul sees Gentile and Jewish conversion on the same basis, though he is creative in his attempts to describe conversion.

vinced before long that the time of the 'missionary situation' had come to an end. In reality, however, there is a new 'missionary situation' in every family in which a baby is born. The 'missionary situation' will never end until the second coming of Christ.<sup>70</sup>

Barth also recognized this:

The Christian life cannot be inherited as blood, gifts, characteristics and inclinations are inherited. No Christian environment, however genuine or sincere, can transfer this life to those who are in this environment. For these, too, the Christian life will and can begin only on the basis of their own liberation by God, their own decision.<sup>71</sup>

We have seen that it is clear from the accounts in the book of Acts that baptism was an integral part of the gospel message (e.g., Acts 2.38), and only recognition of this can explain why, when baptism isn't mentioned, those who heard the gospel were baptized immediately (e.g., Acts 8.12, 36-38; 9.18; 16.33).<sup>72</sup> But within contemporary Evangelical calls to respond to the gospel baptism is almost always absent. Very often this is done for highly commendable, ecumenical reasons and out of respect for the different theologies and practices of baptism among other Christian traditions,<sup>73</sup> but nevertheless the result is the same, that

what in the New Testament was an integral component of becoming a Christian has now become a matter of confessional conviction, or personal option. As Evangelicals we might understand this, but our desire to be thoroughly biblical might (and I believe should) lead us to restore baptism to its New Testament place in conversion and in the gospel we proclaim.

Baptism also needs to be restored to the regular preaching and teaching of the church, because in the New Testament baptism frequently occurs within exhortations to Christians to live out their profession of faith in Christ which was made in their baptism (cf. 1 Tim. 6.12's 'Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called when you made your good confession in the presence of many witnesses'). So, to his own question in Romans 6.1, 'Shall we go on sinning...?', Paul replies with the emphatic, 'By no means!' Then, in Romans 6.11, he declares, 'In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.'<sup>74</sup> In short, we are to live the baptized Christian life. It is a life of discipleship<sup>75</sup> that begins with baptism and is followed by instruction – not for a set period, but for a lifetime of instruction in the Christian way.<sup>76</sup> Olusina Fape concludes his study of the implications of baptism for believers,

in his use of baptism, Paul pursues an argument that develops according to the inner logic of believers' experience. If they have died with Christ

70 E. J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Volume 1. Jesus and the Twelve* (Leicester: Apollos, 2004), 358.

71 K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/4: The Christian Life (Fragment)* (ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 184.

72 Schnabel, *Jesus and the Twelve*, 37, lists baptism as one of the goals of proclamation.

73 E.g., the Baptist evangelist Billy Graham does not call those responding to the gospel to express this in baptism. See, among other examples, his sermon 'Conversion' (preached in Charlotte, North Carolina, on 3 October 1958, transcribed from *The Charlotte Observer* 24 October 1958, 6A), <<http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/docs/bg-charlotte/1003.html>>, accessed 19 August 2007. According to an interview with Patricia Rice, 'The "Simple Proclaimer" Returns to St. Louis', *St Louis Post-Dispatch* 10 October 1999, BG1, Dr Graham recognized that 'Baptism is very important because Jesus taught that we are to believe and to be baptized. But that is up to the individual and the church that they feel led to go to.' He acknowledged that some churches (Lutheran, Episcopal, Roman Catholic and Baptist) are very strong on baptism, but there are some 'that would not insist on baptism. So I give them the freedom to teach what they want. I am not a professor. I am not a theologian. I'm a simple proclaimer... I'm announcing the news that God loves you and that you can be forgiven of your sins... My job from God is not to do all these other things... I am not a pastor of a church. That's not my responsibility. My responsibility is to preach the Gospel to everyone and let them choose their own church...' The widely used *Alpha Course* is another example of this, being a course designed to lead people to Christian commitment, yet baptism is not seen as an integral part of becoming a Christian. However, in the UK the Baptist Union of Great Britain have published Rob Warner's *Baptism and Belonging* (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 2001), for those 'who have recently completed an *Alpha* course and who are now considering the issue of baptism...' (from the Foreword by David Coffey). However, baptism here

follows conversion and is not a part of it. The absence of baptism from becoming a Christian within British Evangelicalism, or at best its marginal role, is discussed by A. N. S. Lane, 'Becoming a Christian: Christian Initiation in the New Testament and in Evangelicalism', forthcoming. I am grateful to Professor Lane for supplying me with a copy of this paper. These examples stand out in stark contrast to the place of water baptism in the Acts' sermons, which Schnabel, *Jesus and the Twelve*, 686, describes (commenting on Acts 2.38 and 8.35) as 'the proper response to the gospel'; and, in Paul's theology, White, *Biblical Doctrine of Initiation*, 202, as the appropriate response to the kerygma.

74 On Rom. 6.1-11 Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 139, remarks on 'the parenetic purpose of this baptismal instruction' that Paul 'desires to stress the ethical consequences that should flow from baptism'.

75 Note Matt. 28.19's making of disciples by baptizing and teaching them. See R. Brow, *"Go Make Learners": A New Model for Discipleship in the Church* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw, 1981), 43, who speaks of baptism as 'the introduction into the sphere or school of the Holy Spirit'. For a survey of the place of the Great Commission within the history of Christian thought, including a useful discussion of the place of baptism within it, see David F. Wright, 'The Great Commission and the Ministry of the Word: Reflections Historical and Contemporary on Relations and Priorities', *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* 25 (2007), 132-57.

76 Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 285: 'Of every baptism recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, the circumstances are such as to exclude the possibility that a long period of catechetical instruction preceded them; the baptisms were administered as soon as faith was professed. Not that the primitive Christian communities considered instruction unnecessary, but the teaching was given *after* baptism, just as the baptized converts of Pentecost "continued in the instruction of the Apostles, in the fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers" (Acts 2.42) (italics original).

and have also been raised with him in his resurrection, they are enjoined to walk in newness of life. Considered from this angle, baptism, in Paul's theology serves to remind believers of the starting point of their new life, *and the need to continue in the same.*

Later he adds, 'baptism becomes a point of reference for the inauguration of a sanctified life for every believer, and a reminder of the need to demonstrate the bestowal of the new life.'<sup>77</sup> In short, the New Testament churches were, as David Wright states so clearly, 'baptized communities'.<sup>78</sup>

#### IV. Conclusion

For centuries, the controversy over the subjects and mode of baptism – believers or infants, immersion or affusion/sprinkling – has been repeated almost by generation and still there seems little likelihood of agreement. Only from time to time has the controversy moved on to the theology of baptism. What I am not suggesting is that Baptists have got it right, while Paedobaptists have got it wrong. Rather, I have argued that in the main neither Baptists nor Paedobaptists at present uphold New Testament baptism.

Evangelical scholars such as the Baptist George Beasley-Murray and the Paedobaptist David F. Wright challenge Baptists and Paedobaptists alike to reform their theologies and practices of baptism according to scripture. With the high view of scripture we profess as Evangelicals it is a particular challenge to us to lead the way in this reformation.<sup>79</sup> Baptism should be more central in our life and thought, as conversion-baptism was in the New Testament. David Wright answers those who would question whether baptism merits such weight being placed on it, 'That the church's practice of baptism was mandated by Christ himself with a clarity shared by very few other things we do in church is a good starting point in answering such a question.'<sup>80</sup>

Returning to Bebbington's four characteristics of Evangelicalism, though altering his order, we see that baptism touches on all of them. First, biblicism: in the earliest church of the New Testament the theology and practice of baptism was very different from the theologies and practices of the church since then, and we should note that the church's theology and practice should ever be *semper reformandum*, ever subject to reform according to the word of God. Second-

ly, conversionism: New Testament baptism was an integral part of conversion. It was a part of the gospel message indicating how the hearer should respond to the gracious call of God in faith-baptism, and those who accepted the message (whether the 3,000 at Pentecost, the Ethiopian eunuch, Lydia and the members of her household, or Saul/Paul) were baptized straight away. Thirdly, crucicentrism: we must not overlook the teaching of Romans 6.3-10 and Colossians 2.12 that we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection through baptism. And, fourthly, activism: the expression of gospel effort evidenced through the way we as Christians live out the baptized Christian life, and this also means that we should restore baptism to its biblical place in the gospel we proclaim as conversion baptism, the act of faith of a believer as they respond to the grace of God who draws near in Christ by his Spirit.

This, then, is the Evangelical sacrament.<sup>81</sup>

#### Abstract

This study is not an apologetic for the credobaptist or pedobaptist positions, but argues that, as practised today, both forms depart from New Testament baptism, which was an integral part of the process of becoming a Christian. It argues that New Testament baptism was faith-baptism, that the baptism referred to in the various New Testament strata refers to this 'one baptism' (of Spirit *and* water), and that baptism occupied an essential place within the primitive church's proclamation of the gospel and its mission. Using David Bebbington's fourfold characteristics of Evangelicalism – crucicentrism, biblicism, conversionism and activism – it shows that New Testament baptism was intimately related to each of these and argues that it should be returned to this place if the church, and especially the Evangelical wing of the church, is to take seriously the necessity that its doctrines and practices should be *semper reformandum*, always subject to reform.

<sup>81</sup> For the development of these arguments, see my forthcoming *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament: Baptisma Semper Reformandum* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2010).

<sup>77</sup> M. O. Fape, *Paul's Concept of Baptism and Its Present Implication for Believers: Walking in Newness of Life* (Toronto Studies in Theology, 78; Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 220, italics added.

<sup>78</sup> See Wright's *Infant Baptism*, 'The Baptismal Community', 259-67, and 363-65 and *passim*.

<sup>79</sup> I am in whole-hearted agreement, therefore, with David F. Wright's aim, *What has Infant Baptism done?*, 37: 'If I have one overarching aim...it is to foster an enhanced appreciation of baptism among Christians and their churches, particularly within the evangelical constituency.'

<sup>80</sup> Wright, *What has Infant Baptism done?*, 82.