

# **BAPTISTS AND CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN SEARCH OF A COMMON THEOLOGY OF BAPTISM**

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Given their name, one would assume that Baptist churches would define their identity in terms of their theology of baptism. Surprisingly, this has not been the case to the extent that one would expect, but what can be said is that very often Baptist identity as it concerns baptism has been expressed in negative terms. So, for example, Baptist churches ‘do not baptize infants’, and they ‘do not baptize by sprinkling or pouring’. For many Baptists, it is emphatically declared that they ‘do not believe that baptism is sacramental’. In the Baptist context in which I received my early Christian nurture, one of the identity-statements would have been that ‘we are not like the Churches of Christ.’ However, in more recent years, a fascinating convergence has begun, and this is a story worth telling and celebrating.

## *Sources of the Conflict*

The Churches of Christ have their origin in British and American renewal movements of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, all of which were in some way seeking to restore the primitive Christian church as they understood it. In Great Britain the precursors included Scots like John Glas (1695-1773), Robert Sandeman (1718-1771), and Archibald McLean (1733-1812). In the USA, where the movement became numerically very significant, its earliest leader was Barton W. Stone, a former Presbyterian, but he was succeeded and eclipsed by the Scottish immigrant Thomas Campbell and especially his son, Alexander Campbell.<sup>1</sup> Alexander was for a few years

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<sup>1</sup> For a concise account of the British and American origins, see William Robinson, *What Churches of Christ Stand For* (Birmingham: Berean Press, 1959), pp. 11-24.

a part of the Baptists in western Virginia, but it was an unstable relationship. Ultimately the Redstone Baptist Association withdrew fellowship from his Brush Run Church in 1824, and in 1832 the Dover Baptist Association excommunicated ‘the Reformers’ (as Campbell and his associates were called), largely due to his views of faith, baptism, and the remission of sins.<sup>2</sup>

Campbell’s writings on baptism are voluminous and cover decades, and they are not entirely clear on the exact relationship between baptism and the remission of sins. In 1828 he wrote, ‘He that goes down into the water to put on Christ . . . has when immersed the actual remission of his sins,’ but in 1843 he said that in baptism the individual ‘formally receives what was at first received by faith in anticipation.’ One of his sympathetic interpreters has admitted that, ‘. . . Campbell’s interpretation of what is achieved in the act itself is ambiguous.’<sup>3</sup> In other words, some of his assertions appear to make *actual* forgiveness of sins and a right standing with God dependent on a valid baptism, while in other places he seems to see only *formal* forgiveness of sins or *assurance* of this right standing as the effect of baptism. If he intended only this latter reference to assurance, then his view of baptismal efficacy was something like the traditional Reformed sense of baptism as a *seal* of union with Christ (as applied to confessing believers), but if he intended the former, then he was clearly moving in a new and questionable direction.

Whatever may have been Campbell’s final opinion, many of his descendants in the conservative portions of the movement tended to adopt the hard-core view. Thus they tended to say that apart from valid baptism with valid motives (i.e., baptism with the conscious intent to receive remission of sins through it), there is no remission of sins, or at least no basis on which

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<sup>2</sup> For an historical and theological analysis of Campbell’s experience among Baptists, see John Mark Hicks, ‘The Role of Faith in Conversion: Balancing Faith, Christian Experience & Baptism’, in William R. Baker (ed.), *Evangelicalism & the Stone-Campbell Movement* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 91-110.

<sup>3</sup> This assertion and the preceding quotes are found in Royal Humbert (ed.), *A Compend of Alexander Campbell’s Theology* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1961), pp. 196, 199.

one might consider a person to be in a right standing with God.<sup>4</sup> This drove a huge wedge between the Churches of Christ (who emphasized that we submit to baptism as a means to salvation) and Baptist churches (who jealously guarded the *sola fide* character of salvation and asserted that we submit to baptism because we have been saved).<sup>5</sup>

Over time both positions tended to harden, and the division became more important as an identity marker on both sides. I am sure that all along the way there have been charitable persons in both camps, but I know from experience that both sides have frequently questioned the Christian status of the other. I have had various conversations with zealous members of the Churches of Christ in which I have asked them about their understanding of my status. I confessed my faith in Jesus Christ via baptism by immersion (in running water, no less!), but in a Baptist context where it was interpreted as merely an act of obedience bearing witness to a previously completed union with Christ. Am I, therefore, to be considered a fellow Christian? The answer is No, according to many of my Church of Christ friends. I also heard the Baptist attacks on the Churches of Christ ('Campbellites' to many Baptists). One of the jokes was that while Baptists affirm 'power in the blood' of Christ, the Campbellites affirm that 'there is power in the tub', and that view of baptismal efficacy was assumed to imply salvation by works. Therefore, such persons would be considered to be purveyors of a false gospel, and thus under the anathema of God (Gal. 1). In my experience there was little contact between the two groups, and not much desire for it.

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<sup>4</sup> A concise account of the views of Campbell and his successors can be found in Joseph Belcastro, *The Relationship of Baptism to Church Membership* (St. Louis: Bethany Press, 1963), pp. 21-38.

<sup>5</sup> For examples of the intensity of the Baptist reaction to Campbell and his associates, see James Robinson Graves, *The Relation of Baptism to Salvation* (Texarkana: Baptist Sunday School Committee, 1881), pp. 16-56; idem., *The Act of Baptism* (Texarkana: Baptist Sunday School Committee, 1881), pp. 44, 56; Jeremiah B. Jeter, *Campbellism Examined* (New York: Sheldon, Lamport & Blakeman, 1855), pp. 191-281.

Apparently the divide has always been smaller in Great Britain for various reasons.<sup>6</sup> The Churches of Christ have never been a large group there, thus providing little basis for confidence in being a distinct group. In fact, most of the British congregations were received into the United Reformed Church in 1981. Both groups in England have existed as dissenters over against a state church, and that would no doubt lead each to focus on their commonalities rather than their differences. Furthermore, Baptists in Great Britain have been much more open to a high view of baptismal efficacy than have their American counterparts, leading to less tension with their ecclesiastical cousins.<sup>7</sup>

This paper, then, will focus on the American context, where Baptist identity in relation to the Churches of Christ has been a major issue, and where in recent history there is evidence of theological convergence and warmer relations. At the outset I should make some comments about terminology in relation to the Churches of Christ. There are three streams of this movement in America: (1) the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), which is ecumenically inclined and theologically diverse; (2) the a cappella Churches of Christ, so-called because of their rejection of musical instruments in corporate worship, which tend to be exclusivist in attitude; and (3) a mediating group variously called Christian Churches or Churches of Christ, which are theologically conservative but employ instruments in worship and are increasingly oriented toward the mainstream of evangelicalism. All of these churches are considered to be part of the Stone-Campbell movement, which is also called by many the Restoration movement. Earlier literature sometimes referred to Stone, the Campbells, and their associates as ‘the

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<sup>6</sup> The relationship is explored in detail in E. Roberts-Thomson, *Baptists and Disciples of Christ* (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1948). See also R. L. Child, ‘Baptists and Disciples of Christ’, *The Baptist Quarterly* 14 (1951-1952), p. 189.

<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive survey of British Baptist perspectives on baptism, see Anthony R. Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain* (SBHT, 3; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000). For an analysis of the theology in greater detail, see Stanley K. Fowler, *More Than a Symbol: The British Baptist Recovery of Baptismal Sacramentalism* (SBHT, 2; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).

Reformers’, but that rapidly leads to confusion for anyone familiar with the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Baptists have often used the label ‘Campbellites’, but that term is highly pejorative and dialogue-inhibiting. In what follows I will use the terms ‘Churches of Christ’ (the label which reflects the desire for post-denominational Christian unity), ‘Restorationists’ (the label which reflects the primitivism inherent in the movement), and ‘Stone-Campbell adherents’ (the label which denotes the major founders of the movement) to denote individuals and congregations in any of the three streams which trace their origin to the work of Stone and the Campbells.

### *Theological Issues*

There are several questions of biblical exegesis and theological synthesis which are at the heart of the distinction between Baptists and Restorationists. Among them would be the following.

- (1) What is the meaning of the actual baptismal texts of the New Testament? ‘No creed but the Bible’ is a slogan heard at times in both movements, so the interpretation of New Testament texts is clearly crucial. This involves, first of all, identifying which New Testament texts actually refer to water baptism, because some Baptists, in their fear of ‘baptismal regeneration’, argue that certain key texts are actually references to Spirit (and not water) baptism (e.g., Rom. 6.3-4; Col. 2.12; Gal. 3.27). In a crucial text like Acts 2.38, the debate is sufficiently fine-tuned to involve a dispute about the meaning of the Greek preposition *εἰς*.
- (2) What is the meaning of ‘faith’? The Stone-Campbell tradition has often been accused of reducing faith to assent (believing ‘that Jesus Christ is the Son of God’, in line with Acts 8.37), but in the Baptist tradition saving faith has always been described in a way that emphasizes its fiducial character.

- (3) What is the place of subjective experience of grace prior to baptism? Baptist roots are found in English Puritanism, and Baptists have generally sought a Puritan-type conversion narrative, with a description of experienced grace, as a condition of baptism. Restorationists have tended to say that this reverses the biblical order and have asked only for a credible statement of faith in Jesus Christ, thus avoiding what they take to be the excessive subjectivism of Baptists and other heirs of the Puritans.
- (4) What does it mean to say that we are justified 'by faith alone'? This concept is a much greater concern for the Baptist side of the dialogue, and for many of them, to state the concern is to reject the Stone-Campbell perspective. But the Pauline writings which give rise to the 'faith alone' concept were addressed to a specific context in which Paul's concern was Torah versus Christ, not faith versus baptism. So one must ask whether the common Baptist concerns are the same as the apostle's concerns.
- (5) If, as the Stone-Campbell tradition asserts, baptism is done in order to experience salvation, does this imply that those who are not validly baptized are not saved? This inference is drawn for their opponents by most Baptists, I think, and also by many in the Stone-Campbell movement, but most persons find it difficult to apply it to the humans they actually know.
- (6) Is baptism fundamentally about human action, divine action, or both? Restorationists have normally said that it is both, with the divine action contingent upon the human action, while Baptists have tended to say that it is human action alone.
- (7) Is there a consistent Restorationist or Baptist tradition on this question? Both sides would say that this is a very secondary question, because what matters is what the

Bible teaches. However, both sides would agree that their labels are not infinitely elastic, so that at some point one's conclusions about biblical teaching would put one outside the tradition. But is there a monolithic tradition on either side? To assume that such exists is not to make it so.

### *Steps toward Convergence*

Convergence between Baptists and Churches of Christ could occur only if Baptists were willing to grant baptism status as some sort of instrument in the application of redemption. Baptists in America have not been the source of much teaching along that line, but they have been the recipients of such from other parts of the Baptist world. British Baptists, in particular, have recovered a sacramental understanding of baptism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and have articulated this in print. Without doubt the most widely acclaimed contribution has been George Beasley-Murray's 1962 classic, *Baptism in the New Testament*, which was published by Eerdmans in the USA as well as Macmillan in England and continues to be widely read. In addition to the presence of this literature in America as a stimulus to Baptist thought, Beasley-Murray taught at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1973 to 1980. Therefore, the stimulus to a higher view of baptismal efficacy was clearly present among Baptists in America from about 1960 on, but it must be admitted that the British reformulation did not easily take root in American soil.<sup>8</sup>

Ultimately, near the end of the last century, some Baptist scholars in the USA did begin to admit that the biblical witness demands that baptism be thought of as a means of grace and an integral part of Christian conversion. Some of these moves are very tentative and modest, but

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<sup>8</sup> When I began research for my doctoral thesis on the 20<sup>th</sup>-century reformulation by British Baptists, I was surprised to discover that there was virtually no serious interaction with the British literature by Baptists in America. The biography of Beasley-Murray by his son indicates that his baptismal theology was a source of controversy more than a means of persuasion in the Southern Baptist context. See Paul Beasley-Murray, *Fearless for Truth* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), p. 180.

there is evidence of a growing recognition that the purely symbolic, anti-sacramental view of baptism does not arise naturally from the biblical language about baptism.

For example, Wayne Grudem explicitly describes baptism as a ‘means of grace’ which is used by the Holy Spirit ‘to increase our experiential realization of death to the power and love of sin in our lives’ and ‘to give additional assurance of union with Christ’. He writes:

Although we must avoid the Roman Catholic teaching that grace is imparted even *apart from* the faith of the person being baptized, we must not react so strongly to this error that we say that there is no spiritual benefit at all that comes from baptism, that the Holy Spirit *does not* work through it and that it is *merely symbolic* (italics original).<sup>9</sup>

One of the more creative Baptist theologians of the recent past, Stan Grenz of Carey Theological College in Vancouver, Canada, has indicated an awareness of the British restatement, which in his view ‘offers a basis for us to reaffirm a sacramental significance for the acts of commitment, while retaining the primacy of the designation “ordinances”’.<sup>10</sup> He recognizes the problem of viewing baptism (and the Lord’s Supper) as *mere* ordinances or symbols:

Viewing the acts of commitment as merely ordinances can be as inappropriate as the magical understandings that the change in terminology was intended to avoid. Under the rationalistic impulse, use of the term ‘ordinance’ has led some thinkers to reject any connection between the sacred practices and divine grace. In so doing, they attach less significance to the ordinances than is present in the New Testament itself. And by reducing these rites to mere symbols, they risk devaluing them.<sup>11</sup>

Clark Pinnock, clearly one of the most creative pioneers among contemporary Baptists, enthusiastically affirms the sacramental significance of baptism, in particular as the normal context for the bestowal of the Spirit to indwell and empower the individual. He writes:

The Spirit is normally given with water in response to faith. This makes baptism a sacrament and means of grace. Proper initiation is water baptism coupled with Spirit baptism. Earlier encounters with the Spirit call for a fresh infusion in water baptism, and

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<sup>9</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), pp. 953-954.

<sup>10</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), p. 671.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 670.

later encounters should be viewed as occasions of release of the potentials of grace bestowed in the sacrament.<sup>12</sup>

Pinnock's sacramentalism is informed to a great degree by the perspectives of Roman Catholic and Orthodox theology (as is clear from a survey of the endnotes in his book), nevertheless, he still affirms the Baptist pattern of dedicating infants and reserving baptism for a later stage of personal confession, in part because baptism is an event 'in which the Spirit comes and we respond'.<sup>13</sup>

Robert Stein, of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has written a significant article in that school's journal defending the following thesis:

In the New Testament, conversion involves five integrally related components or aspects, all of which took place at the same time, usually on the same day. These five components are repentance, faith, and confession by the individual, regeneration, or the giving of the Holy Spirit by God, and baptism by representatives of the Christian community.<sup>14</sup>

Stein proceeds in the rest of the article to demonstrate that his thesis makes sense of the New Testament language about baptism, and then he argues that various Christian traditions tend to separate what Scripture ties together. But this is not a Baptist pointing fingers just at paedobaptists, for he comments:

Baptist theology also deviates from the New Testament pattern. Although repentance, faith, confession, and regeneration are associated with baptism, baptism is separated in time from these four components. Thus baptism is an act which witnesses to a prior experience of repentance, faith, confession, and regeneration. As a result such passages as Romans 6:4, 1 Peter 3:21, Titus 3:5, John 3:3ff., and others, which associate baptism with the experience of conversion, are embarrassing to many Baptists and often receive a strained exegesis at their hands.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, p. 129.

<sup>14</sup> Robert H. Stein, 'Baptism and Becoming a Christian in the New Testament', *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2.1 (Spring 1998), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Stein, 'Baptism', p. 16.

It would be overstating the case to say that Baptist theologians such as these are launching an aggressively sacramental movement, but clearly there is a growing recognition that inherited forms of baptismal theology may be inadequate.<sup>16</sup>

Compelling evidence of this Baptist reformulation has recently appeared in a multi-author book published by the Southern Baptist publishing house.<sup>17</sup> The editors unfortunately continue to use the label ‘sacramental’ as if it applied only to something like a traditional Catholic perspective, arguing that, ‘Sacramental theology clearly compromises the gospel since it teaches that infants enter God’s kingdom by virtue of the sacramental action.’<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the baptismal theology actually developed within the book must be described as sacramental in content if not in terminology. This is nearly affirmed in a footnoted reference to my book that admits that my view may be congruent with the editors’ view, since I agree ‘that those who are unbaptized but believers may still be saved.’<sup>19</sup> I could wish for a better understanding of the nuances of sacramentalism, but still the conceptual framework of the authors asserts what may be lacking in their terminology, as the following summary will demonstrate.

Andreas Köstenberger surveys the baptismal texts of the Gospels, including the crucial baptismal language of Matthew 28:19. Traditionally, many Baptists have argued that this text indicates via the order of the verbs that individuals are first made disciples, and then after becoming confirmed disciples, they are to be baptized, thus refuting both paedobaptism and baptism as an instrument of union with Christ. Köstenberger, on the other hand, argues that the

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<sup>16</sup> Further evidence of the positions of Grenz and Pinnock, as well as contributions by several other Baptists can be found in Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, eds., *Baptist Sacramentalism* (SBHT, 5; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn D. Wright, eds., *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Schreiner and Wright, ‘Introduction’, in *Believer’s Baptism*, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, fn. 4.

participle baptivzontev indicates the manner or means by which persons are made disciples.<sup>20</sup> This instrumental function, therefore, marks out baptism as an essential part of Christian discipleship.<sup>21</sup>

Baptism in Luke-Acts is handled by Robert Stein, who continues to press the points which I have noted above. Baptists have tended to use John the Baptist's words about his baptism in water versus the Messianic baptism in the Holy Spirit to drive a conceptual and temporal wedge between the two. The effect of that dichotomy is to relate Spirit-baptism to conversion and water-baptism to a post-conversion act of sheer obedience, but Stein rejects this construction of the matter. Instead he suggests that this is an instance not of 'antithetical parallelism' but of 'step parallelism', in which the second element (Spirit-baptism) builds on and expands the first element (water-baptism). Christian baptism, then, mediates both repentance (as in John's baptism) and the gift of the Spirit (the new reality of the Messianic age), which is to say that for Luke baptism is part of becoming a Christian.<sup>22</sup>

Acts 2.38 has been a longstanding point of controversy between Baptists and Restorationists, the latter quoting it continually and the former often resorting to exegetical gymnastics to explain it away. Baptists have sought to blunt the natural force of the verse in at least two ways, many following A. T. Robertson's suggestion that the preposition eiv should be translated 'because of' here, and others arguing that the phrase 'for the forgiveness of sins' modifies only 'repent' and not 'be baptized'.<sup>23</sup> Stein argues that each of these approaches is a

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<sup>20</sup> Andreas Kostenberger, 'Baptism in the Gospels', in *Believer's Baptism*, p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Stein, 'Baptism in Luke-Acts', in *Believer's Baptism*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>23</sup> For an analysis of the exegetical debate see Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, pp. 166-170.

tendentious interpretation of the text rooted in false assumptions about the implications of Peter's words, and he asserts that the text clearly sees baptism as leading to the forgiveness of sins.<sup>24</sup>

In Thomas Schreiner's chapter on baptism in the epistles, the author argues at length that baptism is for the apostles 'an initiation event, representing the boundary between the old life and the new.'<sup>25</sup> Whereas many Baptists have wanted to find Spirit-baptism as opposed to water-baptism in texts that seem to say too much for Baptist sensitivities (e.g., Romans 6.3-4; Galatians 3.27; Colossians 2.11-12; 1 Corinthians 12.13), Schreiner is content to read the texts as a natural reference to conversion-baptism in which water and the Spirit are both present, recognizing that such references to baptism could hardly fail to bring to mind the water-baptism of the epistles' recipients. Beyond the explicitly baptismal texts, Schreiner also accepts a baptismal allusion in texts that speak of a spiritual 'washing' connected to regeneration (e.g., 1 Corinthians 6.11; Ephesians 5.26; Titus 3.5).<sup>26</sup>

1 Peter 3.21, with its statement that 'baptism now saves you,' has always forced Baptists to think hard about their anti-sacramental perspective, but Schreiner simply accepts the instrumental force of baptism that is clearly present. As he notes, the text itself makes clear that the instrumental power does not lie in the physical ritual itself, but in the 'appeal to God for a good conscience' that is expressed in the event, but it is still true that baptism is a kind of acted prayer in which forgiveness of sins and a clear conscience are understood as the effects of the event, not the conditions of the event.<sup>27</sup>

Jonathan Rainbow argues for 'confessor baptism' as seen in the early Anabaptists, notably Balthasar Hubmaier in his conflict with Ulrich Zwingli. He laments the fact that Baptists

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<sup>24</sup> Stein, 'Luke-Acts', p. 36.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, 'Baptism in the Epistles: An Initiation Rite for Believers,' in *Believer's Baptism*, p. 92.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83-86.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71, 92.

have often overreacted to the baptismal theology of the various paedobaptist groups and have thus propounded a baptismal theology that is both unbiblical and disconnected with the best of their tradition, a perspective that is ‘often the fruit of misunderstanding on the part of baptists.’<sup>28</sup>

Rainbow writes:

[O]ur look at the 1520s may help Baptists to recover a full-bodied doctrine of baptism instead of the minimalistic view that is often heard in baptist circles today. . . . So what is usually left as the compulsion for baptism among baptists? Obedience. Why do it? Because Jesus did it and the NT commands it. So baptism, instead of being a cataclysmic gateway from death to life, becomes merely the first of many acts of discipleship. The sense of drama is gone, the sense of baptism having some real contact with salvation is gone, and baptism has been reduced to an act of sheer obedience. The real drama is elsewhere, in the private enclave of the heart.<sup>29</sup>

The baptismal doctrine of the Swiss Anabaptists was forged in their controversy with Ulrich Zwingli concerning infant baptism, and as Rainbow notes, Zwingli’s defense of infant baptism was grounded in a separation between faith and baptism and a purely symbolic view of baptism. This was a Zwinglian innovation over against both medieval Catholics and Martin Luther, who posited some sort of infused faith as the experience of infants. Ironically, then, modern Baptists tend to side with Zwingli against the radical reformers, but Rainbow rejects this, saying:

[W]e are dealing with the same bifurcation of matter and spirit that we saw in the baptismal doctrine of Ulrich Zwingli. Among Baptists today, as with Zwingli, there is a fear of allowing water baptism to come too close to the work of grace in the sinner’s heart; there are raised eyebrows and puzzled looks at the NT texts that closely associate baptism with salvation; many would rather not baptize at all than leave room for the impression that baptism is an integral part of the conversion experience.<sup>30</sup>

Rainbow concludes his chapter thus:

For Zwingli, baptism was a *mere* sign. For Hubmaier, it was *more than a sign*. Baptists historically belong in the high baptismal tradition which sees baptism as the expression and embodiment of the saving work of God, the *sacramentum fidei*, not just an act of

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<sup>28</sup> Jonathan H. Rainbow, “‘Confessor Baptism’: The Baptismal Doctrine of the Early Anabaptists’, in *Believer’s Baptism*, p. 205. Rainbow uses the lower-case ‘baptists’ to describe all those who affirm that baptism is limited to confessing believers, whether they use the ‘Baptist’ label or not.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

obedience tacked on. Baptists historically have known how to embrace Peter's declaration, "Baptism now saves you" (1 Peter 3:20 [sic]), not because they ascribe a crude, magical saving power to the rite as such, but because they consider, on the basis of an open and personal confession, that the person coming to the water believes in Jesus Christ, and that there is an inner reality to which the baptism corresponds. Baptism is not magic, but it is more than a sign.<sup>31</sup>

For my purposes in this study, the most significant chapter in the book may be A. B. Caneday's analysis of 'Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement.' There he seeks to explain the diverse statements on baptism by Alexander Campbell in the foundational era of the movement, and also surveys some of the updated statements by contemporary Stone-Campbell scholars. Caneday asserts that Baptists must recognize that while sacerdotally-oriented views of baptism must be rejected, baptism is 'not a bare symbol.'<sup>32</sup> Over against those Baptists who feel it necessary to explain away the language of the NT baptismal texts, which routinely seem to say too much, he argues for a straightforward reading of those texts. A standard proof-text for Restorationists is Acts 2.38, a text that has been a major battleground in the ongoing debate between Baptists and Churches of Christ. Caneday indicates that Baptists must simply accept the fact that the Restorationist interpretation that understands the forgiveness of sins as the result of baptism is 'the obvious sense of the verse.'<sup>33</sup>

Ultimately the question debated between these two Christian traditions is whether baptism looks forward or backward toward salvific union with Christ. Baptists in general have found it difficult to understand baptism as a causal factor in salvation, even though numerous biblical texts seem to say this, but Caneday argues cogently that this is rooted in a failure to distinguish between two senses of causality, the instrumental and the efficient. Baptists tend to say that *faith* (and not baptism) is the cause of salvation, but Caneday suggests that a more

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 206. For another defense of this reading of the baptismal theology of earlier Baptists, see Fowler, *More Than a Symbol*, pp. 10-32.

<sup>32</sup> A. B. Caneday, 'Baptism in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement,' in *Believer's Baptism*, p. 285.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 311.

biblical approach would emphasize that even faith is only an instrumental cause of salvation, while God is the efficient cause. Viewed in this way, one could say that faith and baptism are related to salvation in virtually the same way, i.e., as instrumental causes in the application of salvation, with God as the efficient cause.<sup>34</sup> This view of the matter, written by a Baptist, appears to be clearly in line with the most careful statements of the Restorationist tradition, and Caneday notes with appreciation this rapprochement that is developing among scholars in these two traditions.<sup>35</sup>

It is very significant that this important new book has been produced by self-described conservatives in the Southern Baptist Convention. Up to this point, most of the Baptist literature that has used the language of ‘sacrament’ to describe baptism has come from those described as ‘on the left’ by conservative Baptists.<sup>36</sup> Now that some connected to the conservative resurgence among Southern Baptists have articulated their dissatisfaction with common Baptist rhetoric about baptism and have suggested that baptism is in fact not a mere symbol pointing backward to an already complete conversion, it will be impossible to describe this debate among Baptists as one of right versus left.

Factors other than baptismal theology forced some Baptists to rethink what they meant by the phrase ‘faith alone’. I am thinking here of the intra-evangelical debate over what is called ‘Lordship salvation’, which was touched off by John MacArthur’s *The Gospel According to Jesus* and the critical response by Zane Hodges and others in the Grace Evangelical Society.<sup>37</sup> MacArthur’s contention was that saving faith cannot be disconnected from repentance and the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 312-313.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 326-327.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, Malcolm B. Yarnell, III, ‘The Heart of a Baptist,’ a paper published by The Center for Theological Research, p. 7 (available online at [www.BaptistTheology.org](http://www.BaptistTheology.org)), who specifically refers to the previously noted Cross and Thompson, eds., *Baptist Sacramentalism*..

<sup>37</sup> See John F. MacArthur, Jr, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) and Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

acknowledgement that Jesus is both the source of forgiveness and justification on the one hand and the Lord of life on the other hand, but Hodges and his associates argued vehemently that introducing any kind of commitment to lifestyle change into conversion is to essentially teach works-salvation. Hodges' view has never received wide acceptance, largely because others recognize that the Pauline epistles, which demand the *sola fide* affirmation, set faith in Christ over against a misuse of the Mosaic Law, but not over against repentance and commitment to discipleship. Once this specific focus of *sola fide* is admitted, it can also be seen that Paul does not oppose faith to baptism any more than faith to repentance. Either 'faith' or 'repentance' can be used as a synecdoche to describe Christian conversion, because they are just two aspects of one act of turning to Jesus as Lord, and it is not a great leap to say as well that baptism is the normative way in which this penitent faith comes to tangible, fully personal expression. That would explain those biblical texts which speak of union with Christ in terms of being 'baptized into Christ'.<sup>38</sup>

For Restorationists, one critical factor in the convergence has been increased personal contact with other evangelical traditions, including Baptists. Several scholars in the Stone-Campbell movement have studied at mainstream evangelical schools and thus created greater understanding across the divide. For example, both William Baker of Cincinnati Bible Seminary and Robert Kurka of Lincoln Christian College earned degrees at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Robert Lowery of Lincoln Christian Seminary is a graduate of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Perhaps the greatest leap across the divide, given the resolutely Arminian nature of Restorationism, is seen in John Mark Hicks of Lipscomb University, who earned his

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<sup>38</sup> An illuminating treatment of the Lordship salvation controversy and its implications for the way in which faith and baptism are related can be found in Jack Cottrell, 'The Role of Faith in Conversion', in *Stone-Campbell*, ed. Baker, pp. 75-84.

PhD at Westminster Seminary. Baker has noted that this exposure brought the realization of belonging to a wider Christian community and shattered stereotypes on both sides.<sup>39</sup>

This study in institutions outside the Stone-Campbell orbit forced Restorationists to recognize the obvious presence of the Spirit of God in other Christians, including Baptists who held to a purely memorial view of baptism as obedient witness to a previously completed and validated conversion. This, in turn, forced a second look at their own tradition, notably the writings of Alexander Campbell. Among other things they found there that Campbell himself had affirmed the presence of the Spirit among those who had never been baptized according to his paradigm, and therefore, he affirmed the genuinely Christian status of those persons. For example, Campbell wrote:

I cannot, therefore, make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion into the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well grounded hope of heaven. . . . It is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves and this does not consist in being exact in a few items, but in general devotion to the whole truth as far as known.<sup>40</sup>

In this particular passage, Campbell is discussing the status of paedobaptist Christians, but if he is prepared to consider them as genuine disciples of Christ, then quite clearly he would affirm the same of Baptists who had been immersed with an intention somewhat different from that of the Restoration.

But what about Campbell's assertion that immersion as a confessing believer is the only divinely-ordained means to the remission of sins? A fresh look at Campbell's writings revealed that he did not necessarily speak with the kind of dogmatism and exclusivism which had become

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<sup>39</sup> William R. Baker, 'Christian Churches (Independent): Are We Evangelical?', in *Stone-Campbell*, ed. Baker, pp. 29-31.

<sup>40</sup> Alexander Campbell, 'Any Christians Among Protestant Parties?', *Millennial Harbinger* (1837), p. 412. This assertion by Campbell is quoted and affirmed by John Mark Hicks, 'Balancing Faith', p. 113. See also John Mark Hicks, 'Alexander Campbell on Christians Among the Sects', in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins*, ed. David Fletcher (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1990), pp. 171-202, and Gary Holloway, 'Not the Only Christians: Campbell on Exclusivism and Legalism', *Christian Studies* 15 (1995-1996), pp. 46-54.

common among his spiritual offspring. I have shown above that there is evidence to support the thesis that for Campbell baptism is the God-given, objective means by which God conveys the *assurance* rather than the *fact* of forgiveness. If the two ideas are not always clearly distinguished in Campbell's writings, that is not surprising, because when baptism is understood to be in itself the initial confession of faith in Christ (not a witness to a prior confession), fact and assurance for all practical purposes coincide. It became clear that the Stone-Campbell movement was by no means the monolith that many people, insiders and outsiders, thought it to be.

The Stone-Campbell Study Group within the Evangelical Theological Society has helped to strengthen connections both between the a cappella Church of Christ stream and the independent Christian Church stream of the Restoration movement, and also between Stone-Campbell adherents and other evangelicals (many of whom would be baptistic if not Baptist). The study group first met at the annual ETS meeting in November 1996, and it has met almost every year since, incorporating papers by Restorationists and scholars from outside the movement, including Baptists like Craig Blomberg of Denver Seminary and Stanley Grenz of Carey Theological College in Vancouver, Canada. The published papers of this study group give some of the clearest evidence of the refinements of Restorationist thinking that signify a convergence with Baptist thought.<sup>41</sup>

One sign of convergence is an increased emphasis on the divine activity in baptism and the corresponding willingness to use the term 'sacrament'. Historically, the Stone-Campbell tradition has emphasized baptism as a human act of obedience, the final human condition to be met in order to secure forgiveness from God. As such, they have not felt the need to talk in

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<sup>41</sup> The previously cited *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement* is a collection of the papers given at the Stone-Campbell Study Group Meetings from 1996 to 2000. Another significant contribution is Robert C. Kurka, 'The Stone-Campbell Understanding of Conversion: A Misunderstood "Sola Fide"' (unpublished paper given at the Evangelical Theological Society, Colorado Springs, Colorado, 15 November 2001).

sacramental terms, thinking that such language minimizes the importance of the human response to the gospel and opens the door to a magical understanding of the rite. Without denying the free and responsible character of the human act in baptism, there is a new willingness to speak of baptism as God's act of bringing the penitent sinner into experiential union with Christ, and not just of baptism as the act by which the sinner appropriates Christ and his benefits. In other words, the focus falls on grace more than obedience. Hicks puts it this way:

It is preferable to see baptism as a 'sacramental' moment where God gives his Spirit to believers through faith in God's work at the cross. It is not sacramental in a Roman Catholic sense but sacramental in that it is a 'holy moment' where God acts to unite us to himself in the baptismal symbolism of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a divine means of grace. God truly does something gracious in the moment of baptism.<sup>42</sup>

Once baptism is conceived as a sacrament in which God is active from start to finish and is not just waiting for the human conditions to be met, then it is possible to reformulate baptism as the normative way that God works to seal both human faith and divine bestowal of salvation, without asserting that it is an absolute necessity. To put it another way, it is recognized that God has bound himself to baptism in such a way that the sign, rightly used, leads to the thing signified, but this does not imply that God is bound by baptism in the sense that he cannot convey grace in another way. It is one thing to say that baptism is the normative way in which the sinner turns to Christ for salvation, but quite another thing to say that there can be no salvation unless the move toward Christ occurs in this specific way. This distinction should not seem foreign to Baptists who are acquainted with the 'altar call' methodology. Many Baptist preachers have exhorted their listeners to come to the front of an auditorium in order to be saved without in any way implying that apart from such an act there can be no salvation.

A remarkable evidence of the developing paradigm shift among scholars in the Churches of Christ is the recent book, *Down in the River to Pray: Revisioning Baptism as God's*

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<sup>42</sup> Hicks, 'Balancing Faith', p. 116.

*Transforming Work*, co-authored by John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor (Leafwood Publishers, 2004). The first sentence of the book (which recurs frequently within the book) says, ‘Baptism is more important than you think, but not for the reasons you suppose.’<sup>43</sup> The book proceeds, then, to argue that no tradition, not even their own Restorationist tradition, has articulated the importance of baptism in a thoroughly adequate way. Looking in several directions, they write:

Many believe baptism is simply the sign of salvation already received. Others believe it is an indispensable command that legally divides those heading to heaven from those going to hell. Baptism is more important than either think.

Baptism is a performative, or effectual, sign through which God works by his Holy Spirit to forgive, renew, sanctify and transform. It is a symbol by which we participate in the reality that it symbolizes. We must not reduce it to a mere symbol or sign that only looks to the past without any present power or reality. Baptism is more important than that.

Neither is baptism, however, the technical line between heaven and hell. It is not primarily a loyalty test or a command satisfied by legal performance of the rite. We must not reduce baptism to a line in the sand. Such a reading of baptism’s function reduces its significance to a technical legal requirement. Baptism is more important than that.

While baptism is both a sign and a command, it is more. Baptism points beyond itself and effectually participates in God’s transforming work. God is at work through baptism to transform fallen humanity into his own image, to transform the fallen human community into a people who share the life of the divine, triune community.<sup>44</sup>

This disavowal of baptism as a loyalty test or line in the sand indicates with some clarity that the book is moving away from a major part of the Restorationist tradition, but this becomes clearer yet in the crucial chapter, ‘Transformed Unimmersed Believers?’ The authors retain their tradition’s emphasis on baptism as an instrument in the experience of the forgiveness of sins and the reception of the Holy Spirit, and they face squarely the question of how to view others who do not share that perspective. They argue, contrary to much of their tradition, that the answer is ‘not found in a narrow treatment of the biblical texts regarding baptism,’ but ‘must arise out of

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<sup>43</sup> John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray: Revisioning Baptism as God’s Transforming Work* (Siloam Springs, AR: Leafwood Publishers, 2004), p. 11.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.

the heart, intent and goal of God.<sup>45</sup> Assuming that God's purpose for fallen humans is salvation in its comprehensive sense of renewal in the image of God, baptism is then conceived of as a means of that relational transformation. But a crucial qualifier is that while baptism is an important means, it is only a means and not the end, and the end is more important than the means.<sup>46</sup>

The authors illustrate this superiority of spiritual reality over divinely ordained ritual by reference to Hezekiah's irregular observance of the Passover one month late (2 Chron. 30) and by reference to Jesus' defense of his disciples' activity on the Sabbath (Matt. 12). The application to baptism follows:

Baptism is no less important than sacrifice and Sabbath in Israel's faith. But it is no more necessary than sacrifice and Sabbath were in Israel's faith. Jesus teaches us to choose mercy over sacrifice without devaluing the significance of sacrifice. Consequently, we acknowledge that faith is more important than baptism without devaluing the significance of baptism.<sup>47</sup>

So then, while affirming that baptism is the normative occasion for the experience of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit, thus assuming a unity of water and Spirit in spiritual rebirth, the authors accept that 'the Spirit is free to blow wherever God wills (John 3:8),' even in the lives of persons who 'have misunderstood God's immersion ritual.'<sup>48</sup> This distinction between 'normative instrument' and 'necessary condition' is true both to the best instincts of Alexander Campbell and, more importantly, to Scripture, and it deals effectively with the crucial point of division between Baptists and the Churches of Christ.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 182-183.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 184-185.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 192.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., pp. 193, 197.

### *Conclusion*

It does not take a huge paradigm shift on either side to effect a convergence of Baptists and Churches of Christ in the area of baptismal theology. For Baptists it means being prepared to admit that baptism is the climax of conversion and the act of a penitent sinner, not of a confirmed saint, so that the baptizand is turning to Christ for the conscious experience of salvation. For the Churches of Christ, it means admitting that while the grace of entrance into union with Christ is normatively mediated through baptism, it is not the exclusive means, so that the negative inference, 'No valid baptism implies no salvation,' is invalid. Both of these conceptual shifts are in process, and this is cause for celebration and continued dialogue.