

Verbum

Volume 9 | Issue 2

Article 2

May 2012

Baptism

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Recommended Citation

Kreutter, Katie (2012) "Baptism," *Verbum*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol9/iss2/2>

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Baptism

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"As a conveyor of God's grace, baptism holds a significant role within Christianity and has been regarded as a sacrament by essentially every Christian tradition throughout history as a result. This reality is striking in light of Christian history, which has consistently demonstrated that contention and debate often surrounds central Church doctrine rather than unified agreement, the latter of which is far more challenging to obtain. Even though baptism is upheld as tantamount to the Christian faith and tradition, a variety of primary sources from the Reformation Era indicate that the role and specified definition of baptism varied substantially amongst Roman Catholicism and the various Christian sects that developed there from. In fact, some Christian traditions, like the Anabaptist, separated from the mainstream Church with baptism occupying the central position of the dispute. This work will examine baptism from the perspectives of Roman Catholicism, as well as Magisterial Reform and Protestant traditions ranging from Lutheran, Calvinist, and Methodist to the Radical Reformation with the Anabaptist movement, while considering the differentiation between infant and adult baptism in the process. It will also consider the impact and implications of these ancient positions on 21st century ministry amongst pastors and congregants alike within both individual church bodies and the Church collective while examining the sustaining relevancy of baptism, which remains a central component of the life of the Church today."



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BAPTISM

Introduction

As a conveyor of God's grace, baptism holds a significant role within Christianity and has been regarded as a sacrament by essentially every Christian tradition throughout history as a result. This reality is striking in light of Christian history, which has consistently demonstrated that contention and debate often surrounds central Church doctrine rather than unified agreement, the latter of which is far more challenging to obtain. Even though baptism is upheld as tantamount to the Christian faith and tradition, a variety of primary sources from the Reformation Era indicate that the role and specified definition of baptism varied substantially amongst Roman Catholicism and the various Christian sects that developed there from. In fact, some Christian traditions, like the Anabaptist, separated from the mainstream Church with baptism occupying the central position of the dispute. This work will examine baptism from the perspectives of Roman Catholicism, as well as Magisterial Reform and Protestant traditions ranging from Lutheran, Calvinist, and Methodist to the Radical Reformation with the Anabaptist movement, while considering the differentiation between infant and adult baptism in the process. It will also consider the impact and implications of these ancient positions on 21st century ministry amongst pastors and congregants alike within both individual church bodies and the Church collective while examining the sustaining relevancy of baptism, which remains a central component of the life of the Church today.

Mode of Baptism within Catholicism

The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox faiths regarded baptism as an essential sacrament subject only to the Eucharist, which was valued with a higher caliber due to its incarnational nature.¹ Catholics viewed baptism as a normative means for salvation, as it initiated the process of justification within a believer and cleansed original sin.² It was for this

¹“Decree Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist,” in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, in CCEL, Volume 2, Chapter 3, 129.

latter reason that infant baptism was acknowledged and readily practiced as valid, as it was believed that all humans were born into a sinful state of being that traced back to Adam's initial disobedience in the Garden of Eden.³ Infant baptism was also justified based upon Scripture and, in particular, Colossians 2: 11-12, which was interpreted to signify that the old sign of God's covenant between humans and God performed at infancy, circumcision, was replaced through Christ with the sign of the new covenant, baptism.⁴

Since the faith of the child could not be determined at an early stage of life, however, there was also a community aspect to baptism within Catholicism, as the child's caregivers and community of faith in which the child was to be raised were expected to contribute to the child's faith development, and his or her own acknowledgment of faith later on in life at confirmation was also expected.⁵ By consequence of this, however, it was also believed that it was possible for a person to lose faith and fall away from God through persistent sinfulness, and thereby be in jeopardy of losing salvation, although the grace bestowed upon the person at baptism instilled an indelible character and could not be revoked in its validity regardless of the will of the person.⁶ While one could renounce one's baptism, one was still obligated to the fruits associated with the sacrament, mainly living a Christian life in thought and practice.⁷ Likewise, although Catholicism did not profess the belief that one was saved through works, but rather faith was to be found as the foundation, it was believed necessary for any baptized believer to respond to God's extension of grace through engaging with good and pious works, without which the authenticity of that person's faith was criticized.⁸ For it was believed that the profundity of the work of the Holy Spirit commencing justification within baptism did not provide for "the remission of sins merely, but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man, through the voluntary reception of the grace, and of the gifts, whereby man of unjust becomes just."⁹ In this way, baptism served as much more than a singular act, and signified the start of a faith journey

²“Decree on the Sacraments” (Ibidem 123).

³“On Original Sin” (Ibidem 85).

⁴“On the Longer Catechism of the Eastern Orthodox Church,” (Ibidem, Volume 2, Questions 293-294).

⁵Ibidem, Question 295.

⁶“Decree on the Sacraments,” (Ibidem 123).

⁷Ibidem, 125.

⁸Ibidem, 123.

⁹“Decree on Justification,” (Ibidem, Chapter 7, 94).

that would develop throughout a person's life unto eternity.

Roman Catholicism clearly presented a very stringent view on baptism, and even professed that, as the sole and true Church, it held the only true doctrine regarding the sacrament.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it was acknowledged that baptisms performed by those outside of this tradition could still be regarded as "true" if the triune formula was followed "with the intention of doing what the Church doth."¹¹ While, as mentioned earlier, the Eucharist was viewed as holding the utmost significance with Catholicism, it could be argued that baptism was even more significant, although in a different capacity, given that without its receipt one could not partake in the Eucharist as one who had been established as a Christian in the faith. Despite all of the declarations supplied by the Catholic Church in regards to baptism, however, there remained a distinctive mystery and ineffability surrounding the sacrament, as the enigmatic work of God was supremely acknowledged as central to the rite in both infants and adults.

Mode of Baptism Within Lutheranism

Lutheranism presented a view on baptism that was relatively similar to Catholicism as a normative means of salvation and likewise readily practiced infant baptism and viewed it as valid.¹² In his "On Baptism" section of his *Sermons on the Catechism*, Luther argued in favor of paedobaptism extensively, and defended his position with clear points based both on Scripture and observation. Initially, he seemed to almost contradict himself in that he supported his understanding of the sacrament of baptism with a citation from Mark 16:16 that states that all who believe and are baptized will be saved, which seems to signify a conscious act on the part of the one who is engaged with the undertaking of belief in and of itself.¹³ Later on in the work, Luther claimed that a person's faith, or this act of believing, was independent of the act of baptism, which was to be viewed as valid regardless of whether or not the person professed that he or she believed in Christ and the salvific work of God through him, thus justifying infant baptism.¹⁴ In this view, God bestowed God's grace upon a person at the time of baptism even in spite of his or her self.

Luther further established this point by the contention that the workings of the Holy Spirit could be evidenced within a person after baptism as he or she developed physically and

¹⁰Ibidem, 122.

¹¹Ibidem, 123.

¹²*Martin Luther, Selections From His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), 345.

¹³Ibidem, 230.

¹⁴Ibidem, 232.

spiritually in faith, and, consequently professed that children in fact do believe when they receive baptism in the sense that there exists within the act a holy and spiritual component with a subsequent inner working within an individual.¹⁵ Thereby, this aforementioned apparent contradiction was reconciled by Luther. Like Catholicism, Luther affirmed that it was indeed possible for a person to object to his or her baptism, although the baptism itself could not be revoked because of this mysterious and sanctified facet.¹⁶ Consequently, a baptism was temporal and eternal, momentary and effectual, in that it was believed that the person being baptized received God's forgiveness at that very moment and was redeemed before God becoming "a member of Christ" and "com[ing] into Christ's kingdom" with Christ as Lord, yet it was presumed that that "fruit" would be yielded throughout that person's lifetime.¹⁷

As could be presumed based upon this argument, Luther differed from the Catholic position to a degree in terms of perspective in relation to the notion of baptizing an infant on the basis of his or her parent's or caregiver's faith, although the expectation that the child would be raised in the faith was still evident.¹⁸ This was due to the fact that Luther emphasized the role of the Word of God as primary both in the founding and in the carrying out of the sacrament.¹⁹ God was the primary actor in the issuance of the commandment to believe and be baptized as well as in the union of God's Word to the sacramental element through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, it was unnecessary for any volition on the part of the human being, either personally or by proxy by way of a guardian. Although Luther was seemingly mainly at odds with the Roman Catholic Church from a doctrinal perspective, the emphasis he placed upon baptism as a necessity of the Christian faith mirrors the tradition with which he objected with little distinction, which is a substantial reality worthy of note.

Mode of Baptism Within Calvinism

Much like Lutheranism, thoughts on baptism in the Reformed tradition in Europe contained many aspects similar to Catholic teaching and theology while introducing a distinct perspective on the sacrament. John Calvin defended infant baptism against critics of his time with significant detail, and, in similarity to Luther, deemed the Word of God as central to a consideration of the sacrament.²⁰ In his defense of paedobaptism in his acclaimed work

¹⁵Ibidem

¹⁶Ibidem, 233.

¹⁷Ibidem, 231.

¹⁸Ibidem, 233.

¹⁹Ibidem.

Institutes of the Christian Religion, Calvin expounded upon the Catholic position that infant baptism is indeed validated by Scripture in relation to its correspondence with circumcision “as seen in the internal office, the promise, the use, and the effect.”²¹ In relative similarity to Luther, Calvin recognized a twofold component to baptism with the initial “remission of sins” occurring once the act is put forth as well as the “mortification or regeneration” of a person throughout his or her lifetime leading up to eternal life and he contended that these two aspects applied to infant baptism as well.²² He noted that the promise given by God to Abraham at the first institution of the practice of circumcision “include[d] the promise of eternal life” from the forgiveness of sins, coupled with an aspect of “mortification” as the people were admonished to “circumcise the foreskin of their heart” living rightly before the LORD as God’s chosen people.²³ Drawing both from Scripture and Church tradition, Calvin surmised that both of these promises put forth both by God and by the people with whom God was covenanting became obsolete with the coming and sacrifice of Christ and Christ’s institution of baptism as the normative means for one to be recognized as one of God’s people and a member of Christ’s body through the work of the Holy Spirit and evidenced by subsequent holy living.

To a commonly upheld objection of his day that infant baptism was not to be considered legitimate because there were no accounts within Scripture of the apostles engaging with the practice, Calvin offered the response that its omission did not signify its absence, as ancient scholars “trace[d] its origin to the days of the apostles” and “attending to the end for which it was instituted, [it was] clearly perceive[d] that it [was] not less applicable to children than to those of more advanced years, and that, therefore, they cannot be deprived of it without manifest fraud to the will of its divine author.”²⁴ In this way, Calvin emphasized not only the acceptability, but the necessity, of baptizing infants.

Much like Luther, Calvin acknowledged a divine and ineffable component to baptism that extended beyond a mere sign or symbol, and espoused that the faith of the child was not necessary for God’s extension of grace to be received at baptism, although it was believed that one of the benefits of baptism for an infant would be his or her growth in faith throughout his or her lifetime, with an aspect of responsibility inherent for the child and adult the infant would

²⁰John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “Paedobaptism,” in CCEL, Book 4, Chapter 16, Section 1.

²¹*Ibidem*, Section 16.

²²*Ibidem*, Section 3.

²³*Ibidem*.

²⁴*Ibidem*, Section 8.

become as well as the community of believers in that child's life.²⁵ Calvinism proponent the practice of infant baptism as an integral initiation to a faith journey to such a degree that any opposition to it was declared an act of Satan with the reasoning that it displayed the depth of the unconditional mercy of God, which is extended even to seemingly incapable infants who are useless from a societal perspective and encouraged the application of spiritual teaching and learning in a relationship with God.²⁶ Although it was acknowledged that infants lack the capacity to understand the meaning and effects of baptism, this did not retract from God's capabilities to "sanctif[y] whom he pleases, in the way in which he sanctified John, seeing that his power is not impaired."²⁷ This would seem to be in accordance with the biblical notion that humans are not capable of attaining to salvation out of their own faculties. Nevertheless, this argument seems to be based upon John's receipt of the Holy Spirit at infancy as conveyed by Scripture, yet this sanctification is arguably a mode distinct from water baptism and could potentially thereby be unmerited for comparison.

Mode of Baptism Within Wesleyanism

As an Anglican influenced by Calvinist views, John Wesley's position on baptism was very close to that found in Calvinism. Although Wesley composed his writings on the subject towards the very end of the traditional Reformation period, it is interesting to note, yet also understandable, that much of Wesley's teaching on the nature of baptism and for whom it was designed by God is similar to Catholic teaching as well. For instance, Wesley condoned infant baptism on the basis of the doctrine of original sin.²⁸ Yet he approached baptism from a slightly different perspective than his predecessors in that he seemed to have placed a more significant emphasis on baptism as an outward sign or symbol of one's inward repentance and initiation into the Church as the body of believers, although he nevertheless contended that there was a spiritual and pneumatological character within the act as well through "the washing away" of "the guilt of original sin, by the application of the merits of Christ's death."²⁹ In this way, and with the receipt of God's grace, baptism signified "profession, and mark of difference" as well as

²⁵Ibidem, Section 9.

²⁶Ibidem, Section 32.

²⁷Ibidem, Section 17.

²⁸John Wesley, "Treatise on Baptism," <http://personalpages.tds.net/~amiddlek/Theology/Treatise%20on%20Baptism.htm> (accessed December 17, 2011), Section 4, Paragraph 2.

²⁹Ibidem, Section 2, Paragraph 1.

“regeneration, or the new birth” on the part of the one being baptized.³⁰

Wesley, like those before him, also based his argument upon Scripture, and acknowledged structural and sacramental parallels between circumcision and baptism. While Luther and Calvin seemed to illustrate the magnitude of God’s grace and mercy by illustrating the helplessness and utter dependence of infants as symbolic of the state of all frail and imperfect human beings before God, Wesley emphasized the capability of infants to make and partake in a covenant, being “obliged by compacts made by others in their name, and receiv[ing] advantage by them.”³¹ Thereby, from a very early stage of life, infants were both entitled to the redeeming benefits of having God’s grace bestowed upon them and responsible for living up into that state of grace through faithful participation in Christ’s body and right words and deeds with the communal support of other believers.

Wesley expounded upon Calvin’s argument that the fact that no overt mentions of infant baptism appeared in the New Testament at the hands of the apostles did not necessitate that the practice was not being put forth as he argued that the baptizing of infants was a routine practice within Judaism, albeit for a different reason, and, as a result, would have continued as a practice among early Jewish followers of Jesus unless deemed unnecessary by Christ, and no such allusion is given in Scripture.³² From this standpoint and drawing upon historical scholarly documents evidencing infant baptism, Wesley concluded that “[i]f to baptize infants has been the general practice of the Christian Church in all places and in all ages, then this must have been the practice of the apostles, and, consequently, the mind of Christ.”³³ While the latter part of this argument seems justified within the context of history, it seems that the former could potentially be questioned from the perspective that, as mentioned earlier, baptism was practiced within Judaism for a reason entirely distinct from that which is associated with Christian baptism, especially from the aspect of entering into Christ’s body as a member of the Church, and the Jewish practice of the rite would presumably have been understood in its original context even after the advent of Christ since early Christ followers did not see a contradiction between being Jewish and Christian simultaneously. Perhaps for this very reason baptism was redefined within the Jewish Christian perspective, however, and thus carried with it a new component of redemption to infants as well as adults. Nevertheless, it is clear that this sacred practice was maintained as tantamount to the Christian faith by Wesley, who followed in the teachings of

³⁰“Methodist Articles of Religion,” in *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. Philip Schaff, in CCEL, Volume 3, Article 17.

³¹John Wesley, “Treatise on Baptism,” Section 4, Paragraph 3.

³²*Ibidem*, Paragraph 6.

³³*Ibidem*, Paragraph 9.

earlier reformers, which would seemingly necessitate its bestowment early on in life.

Mode of Baptism Within the Radical Reformation Movement

From the consideration of baptism and its application to infants thus far, it would seem that this particular mode of its practice was historically rooted and apostolic in nature, although in modern times the perception often seems to be to the contrary viewpoint within a variety of Christian denominations. The basis for this contention is affected in no small part by the teachings of those who were part of the Radical Reformation movement, which will be considered at present.

Perhaps the most well-known sect of Radical Reformers that centralized debate around the very subject of baptism were the Anabaptists, who, as the name suggests, rejected infant baptism and espoused believer's baptism as the only viable mode of the practice once a person had reached an age capable of discernment. For the Anabaptists, the definition of the word 'believe' from the passage in Mark referenced earlier encompassed a component of "learning and understanding" that applied to human faculties themselves and a direct responsibility on the part of the individual to claim his or her faith, rather than some spiritual or ethereal component assisting an incapable individual in the acquisition of faith, as Lutheranism and the Reformed tradition seemed to suggest.³⁴ Before baptism could be received, and before this belief could be acknowledged, it was believed that the gospel of the Lord needed to first be heard and accepted.³⁵

Baptism in this tradition was viewed much more as an outward sign or symbol of God's extension of grace than an inward transformation effected by the Holy Spirit, although "a demonstration of divine love" and a transformed state of being "in obedience to Christ with love, life, goods and honor" in community with other believers was still expected on the part of the baptized believer.³⁶ Similarly, an indefinable aspect of a profound and spiritual nature was still regarded to some degree within baptism, as well as a covenantal component, since "[the] believer accepts the sign of baptism as a covenant of acceptance before the Christian community, to be received into the covenant of God, in the name of God, whose power and might have separated him from those things which the heart desires."³⁷ While the person held a role in accepting

³⁴Hans Hut, *Early Anabaptist Spirituality: Selected Writings*, ed. Daniel Liechty, (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 56, Google e-book.

³⁵*Ibidem*, 57-58.

³⁶*Ibidem*, 57.

³⁷*Ibidem*

God's offer of salvation, it is evident that the Being with the utmost and supreme authority in the process was still God, seemingly in spite of claims from critics that believer's baptism signified a form of self-reliance and the obtaining of one's salvation on one's own. Likewise, the Christian community also remained a significant piece, as before, in declaring God's sovereignty as they carried out the mission of Christ on Earth as his faithful body and fostered accountability for any who claimed to be a believer in and follower of Christ as Lord. Further, as Hans Hut contended, "[w]hoever would be a disciple of the Lord must be baptized and made pure in the Holy Spirit and be united by the bonds of peace into one body."³⁸ Thereby, the significance of all three of these roles, that of the individual, that of the community, and that of God through the working of the Holy Spirit, within Anabaptist thought and practice is unequivocally declared.

Application to 21st Century Ministry

While many of the ancient controversies surrounding baptism have been rectified over the centuries to become less prominent today, it is arguable that the dispute between the validity of adult versus infant baptism has retained relevancy into the modern era, especially amongst those who may have been raised outside of the Church and may be unfamiliar with the doctrine of baptism and the meaning behind the outward sign, and may only be familiar with the various positions upheld both by the Catholic Church and various Protestant denominations that specify either that infant baptism is allowable and encouraged or prohibited and even sacrilegious.

Without historical context and background surrounding both of these modes of the sacrament, it seems individuals who are considering baptism for themselves or for their children could easily become confused at best and ill informed and swayed to a harmful or negative perspective by false teaching at worst. Therefore, a pastor or church leader necessarily must be knowledgeable at least to some degree on the breadth of positions that have surrounded the sacrament on both a doctrinal and practical level throughout history, and especially during the Reformation Era when teaching on the subject was solidified with the presumed intention of being preserved to remain authentic for future generations. By having access to this knowledge base, he or she can respond to the needs of a congregant both in preparation for baptism, even for those who may only be inquisitive and have no immediate intention of receiving the sacrament, and for the time the sacrament is performed as well as afterwards as a form of guidance and support for the new believer who could benefit from the wisdom and experience of ancient theologians, pastors, and thinkers.

Almost ironically, it seems that in today's time period there exists as much if not more ignorance surrounding a clear and deep understanding of the sacrament of baptism and its

³⁸Ibidem, 57-58.

various modes of observance as there existed centuries ago when the wealth of ministry and educational materials that contemporary Church and lay leaders now may access were not nearly as abundant or readily available. This may be due to the fact that the issue is not as pressing within Christian communities of faith as other social or societal issues. Whether or not this should be the case is essentially a matter of opinion in terms of which matters are deemed to be the most significant, relevant, and worthy of consideration within the Church today. Nevertheless, it would seem that the subject of baptism should merit a substantial degree of regard due to its significance as one of the biblical ordinances instituted by Christ and its profundity and excellence within Christianity as an essentially universally accepted means of grace upon a believer by God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

As a sacrament and as a transformative vehicle of God's grace, baptism has withstood the passing of time and generations to remain existentially and spiritually relevant into the present era. The debate surrounding whether or not infant or adult baptism is to be received as the preferred or standard mode of the bestowment of baptism also has retained its relevancy, as there is still no consensus within the Church surrounding the appropriate means by which baptism is received. It is for this reason that a consideration and analysis of the teaching of prominent Church leaders from centuries ago additionally remains relevant as well as necessary today, in order that ordained and lay ministers alike may benefit, engage with, and learn from the established insights for practical application to current settings and a deeper and more informed and holistic perspective.



Baptismal Font in the Cathedral of Montecarlo,
Princesdom of Monaco
(Photo taken by MC)