

AS GOD'S GIFT TO THE CHURCH, BAPTISM IS  
AN INVALUABLE AID TO SAVING FAITH

Josiah Meyer

David Guretzki, PhD

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## **OUTLINE**

Thesis: As God's gift to the church, baptism is an invaluable aid to saving faith.

- I. Introduction
- II. Sacramentalism
- III. Evangelicalism
- IV. The Covenant Community
- V. A New Approach to Baptism: Utilizing God's Gift for the Church

## **I. Introduction**

Although nearly all Christians identify baptism as an essential part of their faith, the specific doctrines of this sacrament have been extremely divisive throughout history. Unhelpful to this discussion is the fact that most literature has tended to begin with the how's (especially within evangelical circles) and who's (within the larger catholic church) of baptism, then move into the why's and how's to defend denominational practice. Rather than continue this unhealthy defensiveness, I would like to present a more open-minded approach to the issue.

There are four questions which I believe cut to the complex heart of the theology and practice of baptism. Regarding the theology of baptism, it must be asked: 1) are initiation into the visible church (or "Christendom"), and initiation into the invisible church (or "the elect"<sup>1</sup>) combined, linked or separate events?, and 2) does baptism effect or merely celebrate this initiation? The wide variety of theological positions may generally be seen as arranging themselves at various places along a continuum, depending on their answers to these two questions. The two questions which define baptismal practice are, 3) to which initiation (or both, or neither) does baptism properly belong? And 4) should some observance other than baptism serve for one of the two initiations?

Although it would be impossible to explore all of the theological positions on baptism, I will explore three positions in the course of this paper, which I consider to be generally representative of the theological landscape on this issue. Most, if not all, theological perspectives may be understood by their distance from, or proximity to, Sacramentalism or Evangelicalism (as the two poles of the spectrum) or Covenantalism, (as a variously-defined middle-ground).

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, "the elect" will refer to all those who have a genuine salvation experience. Whether it is possible for them to lose their salvation, whether they were truly saved, whether they can know they are part of the elect, etc., are questions which are, obviously far beyond the aim or scope of this paper.

After exploring the pro's and con's of each of these positions, I will explain and define my own position, which is summed up in the statement that, "As God's gift to the church, baptism is an invaluable aid to saving faith."

## II. Sacramentalism

On one extreme of the baptismal continuum is the position known as Sacramentalism, which tends to emphasize the supremacy of God's initiative over man's, and to stress a strong connection between matter and spirit. This position is most often associated with the Catholic Church, although it is also the traditional position of Anglicans and Lutherans.<sup>2</sup>

According to the Catholic Encyclopedia, "baptism *by its mere ministratio*"<sup>3</sup> regenerates each baptismal candidate, "who in his heart poses no obstacle to the reception of the graces of baptism."<sup>4</sup> The Latin term for this concept is, *ex opere operato*, meaning, "from the work of the *action*." This phrase is contrasted with *ex opere operantis*, "from the work of the *agent*," which refers to "personal actions and exertions of the subject (e.g. everything obtained by simple prayer)"<sup>5</sup> Thus, since God is the real player in salvation, "To ask more faith [than is necessary to bring an individual to the font] is to question the all-sufficiency of Christ."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Marlin Jeschke, *Believers Baptism for Children of the Church*, (Scottsdale, PN; Herald Press, 1983), 42.

<sup>3</sup> J. Pohle, trans. Joseph P. Thomas, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Sacrifice of the Mass," Volume X, [document online], Available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10006a.htm>, Internet; Accessed April 12, 2007, *italics added*.

<sup>4</sup> J. Pohle, trans. Joseph P. Thomas, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Sacrifice of the Mass."

<sup>5</sup> J. Pohle, trans. Joseph P. Thomas, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, "Sacrifice of the Mass."

<sup>6</sup> R.R. Osborn, R.R. Osborn, *Forbid Them Not: The Importance and History of General Baptism*, (London, England: The Camelot Press Ltd., 1972), 36,

Further, the Council of Trent anathematized the teaching that, “True and natural water is not necessary for baptism,” and that, “Baptism is...not necessary for salvation.”<sup>7</sup> Rather, they take Jesus’ statement that, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God,”<sup>8</sup> (John 3:5) and “he who has believed *and has been baptized* shall be saved,” (Mk 16:16, *italics added*) literally, to mean that salvation is impossible apart from baptism. Sacramentalists also point to close ties between salvation and baptism throughout Scriptures,<sup>9</sup> to indicate that water baptism is the only means of salvation, which it effects it *ex opere operato*.

Although observing the sacrament of confirmation, Catholics are careful not to allow it to signify a secondary level of salvation. Rather, (in answer to the questions posed in the introduction), Catholics 1) deny a division between the introduction into the church and the elect,<sup>10</sup> and 2) state that baptism really effects this transition. Since there is no secondary initiation, 3) baptism properly belongs only to one’s introduction into the visible/invisible church, and 4) no separate observance is needed. Confirmation and the other sacraments should be seen as “second planks” of salvation, which was completely begun in baptism.

The most commonly raised problems with the Sacramental position lies in it’s apparent opposition to the simple faith-based formula for salvation given throughout the New Testament.<sup>11</sup> If Romans 10:9 is taken literally, there are many instances in Scriptures where salvation seems to

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Eugene IV, Exultate Deo, “The Decree for the Armenians”, [document on-line]; available from, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02258b.htm>, Internet; accessed May 10, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> *All Scriptures quoted from*, The Lockman Foundation, *The New American Standard Bible*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Mark 16:16, 1Pet 3:21, Titus 3:5 and John 3:5.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Footnote #1.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Rom 10:9, Acts 15:11, 16:31, 1Cor 1:21, 15:2, etc.

preclude baptism, since there are many who “believed” and “confessed” before baptism.<sup>12</sup> On seeing the Holy Spirit manifested in the household of Cornelius, Peter said to his companions, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” (Acts 10:47) Since the Holy Spirit is given as a “pledge of our inheritance,”<sup>13</sup> the pre-baptismal anointing of Cornelius’ household presents a serious problem for *ex opere operato* salvation.

In addition to Scriptural problems, there are a number of pragmatic problems with *ex opere operato* salvation. Laurence Hull Stookey points out that, “Stress upon the sacramental character of baptism can lead to misunderstanding so that the rite comes to be viewed mechanically, or even magically.”<sup>14</sup> Marlin Jeschke concurs, adding that, “Baptism poses the danger of self-deception. Since baptism under normative conditions marks entrance upon the life of faith, people can cherish false assurances, presuming that the rite of baptism always performe leads to faith.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, although Sacramentalism tends to focus on the all-sufficiency of Christ, it probably places too much authority in the hands of men. If baptism – an action which may be taught, administered or forbidden by man – is the sole and complete method of entrance into the Kingdom, then has not man replaced Christ as, “the door of the sheep” (John 10:7)? People may also lean on their certain citizenship, lineage, payments to the church, etc. to earn them the “right of baptism,” or entrance into Heaven. In this way they may fall into the trap of Simon the Magician, whom Peter condemned by saying, “May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!” (Acts 8:20).

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<sup>12</sup> Acts 8:12-13f, 37f, 18:8.

<sup>13</sup> Eph 1:14

<sup>14</sup> Laurence Hull Stookey, *Baptism: Christ’s Act in the Church*, (Nashville, TN; Abingdon, 1991), 42.

<sup>15</sup> Jeschke, *Believers Baptism for Children of the Church*, 42.

### III. Evangelicalism

On the polar opposite side of the spectrum from Sacramentalism is the position of most Protestant Evangelicals,<sup>16</sup> which, in reaction to *ex opere operato* salvation, states that baptism must be no more than an outward sign of inward redemption, with absolutely no power in itself. Essential to this view is a Platonic division of matter and spirit, where the latter greatly superseding the former. Thus, since, “the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal,” (2Cor 4:18) baptism must be merely the visible symbol or the lasting, spiritual reality.

Proponents of this view build on Luther’s *sola fide* theology of salvation through grace alone, working through faith alone, not works. Since salvation is basically a personal, spiritual matter, baptism really has no place in the *process* of salvation, but only in the *remembrance* of it. The authors of “What Christians Believe,”<sup>17</sup> write that the true significance is, “First of all...an act of obedience to the expressed will of the Lord Jesus (Matthew 28:19).” Continuing in direct opposition of Sacramentalism (and, Sacramentalists would certainly inveigh, a literal interpretation of Titus 3:5), the authors go on to write that, “It’s purpose *is not to put away the filth of the flesh*, but rather to give the Christian a good conscience toward God, knowing that he has obeyed the Lord’s will (1Peter 3:21).” (*Italics added*)<sup>18</sup> The second reason which the authors give is that it pictures the death and resurrection of Jesus, in which they already participated when they became regenerate. In a summative final point, the authors write that, “The truly baptized

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<sup>16</sup> Although not necessarily representative of all Evangelicals, the term “Evangelicalism” will be used to describe the position here presented.

<sup>17</sup> Alfred P. Gibbs et al., *What Christians Believe: Simple Bible Studies in Basic Bible Doctrine and Christian Living*, (Chicago, IL, Moody Press, 1951).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

person is the one who has not only been baptized in literal water, but whose life shows that the flesh...has been put in the place of death.”<sup>19</sup>

Thus, in answer to the questions posed in the introduction, Evangelicals: 1) put a definite distance between church membership and salvation, and 2) state that baptism is a mere celebration, with no power in itself to initiate. 3) In an interesting development, Evangelical theology ties baptism salvation, while actual practice (which usually does not extend baptism for new, young or struggling Christians) distances it from that event. Rather, Evangelicals tend to 4) loosely commemorate introduction into the visible church with baby dedication, and entrance into the invisible church by various symbols, (such as the decision card, the altar call, the sinner’s prayer, inductory announcements, etc.) while almost creating a third introduction for baptism: maturity. Thus, baptism introduces a Christian into the exclusive number of mature, stable, respectable (etc.) Christians, and may be tied to membership in a certain denomination or church.

Evangelicals often have a hard time explaining the close association of salvation with baptism in the Bible, and usually avoid such Sacramentalist proof-texts as John 3:5, Mark 16:16, or try to make ‘*udor* and *baptizo* in these passages refer to a spiritual rather than a literal baptism.<sup>20</sup> Evangelicalism is also attacked for the fact that there is no real place for children of believers, despite the fact that scriptures identify children of Christians as different others.<sup>21</sup> Evangelicals are called overly individualistic, failing to recognize the way in which God chooses and saves people groups corporately, and creating an unrealistic division between God’s dealings in the Old and New Testaments. Finally, the emphasis on “crisis conversions” tends to subtly or

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<sup>19</sup> Alfred P. Gibbs et al., *What Christians Believe*, 96.

<sup>20</sup> Uuras Saarnivaara in *Scriptural Baptism; A Dialog between John Bapstead and Martin Childfont*, (New York, NY: Vantage Press, Inc., 1953), 44, points out that this is difficult exegetically, since *baptizo* in John 3 referred in the same passage to literal baptism.

<sup>21</sup> Acts 2:38-39, 1Cor 7:14.

even explicitly encourage children of Christians to spend a period of their younger lives “sowing wild oats” so as to have a more sensational testimony. Despite the practical difficulties with this practice (all backsliders return spiritually scarred, many not at all), this dis-integration of children of Christians defies the biblical model of household teaching of children,<sup>22</sup> and almost sanctifies sin. It is as though the road to heaven need dip into the borders of hell for enrichment, since it is deficit in itself to fortify the soul for ministry!

#### **IV. The Covenant Community**

Landing at diverse positions between Sacramentalism and Evangelicalism, Covenantalism is by far the most complex position explored in this paper. The Covenant position rests heavily on the understanding that God does not view people primarily as individuals, but as individuals within social and filial networks. Covenantalism is also tied closely with some form of Dispensationalism, in which Israel is replaced by the Church, and circumcision is replaced by baptism. Thus, just as circumcision ushered an individual of any age into the covenant community of Israel under the Old Covenant – where God intended for them to be instructed on how to enter the “true Israel” by means of faith (cf. Rom 9:6-8) – so baptism ushers an individual of any age into the visible Church, where they likewise may become part of the “elect,”<sup>23</sup> or invisible church. A strong passage for Covenantalism<sup>24</sup> is 1 Corinthians 7:14; “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy.” This

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<sup>22</sup> Deut 6:4-9, 2 Tim 1:5, 2:2, 3 John 1:4.

<sup>23</sup> 1 Pet 1:10-11.

<sup>24</sup> Although “Covenant theology” or “Covenantalism” may refer to many things, here it refers only to the position being defended in this section.

“sanctification” (‘*agiazw*) of unbelievers<sup>25</sup> was seen as extending not only to the unsaved members of a Christian’s household, but all who are baptized into Christendom. Against Sacramentalism, however, Covenantalists do not teach that this sanctification mechanically effects entrance into both the visible and invisible church, since there must be a division between these two. This is not the sharp dichotomy of Evangelicalism, however; Covenantalists maintain that these two events are somehow linked. Differences in the degree and nature of that link, and in baptism’s role in these events make for the diversity, complexity, and sometimes inconsistency of the Covenant position.

In an attempt to do justice to the Evangelical division of Christendom and salvation, while still honoring the Sacramentalist contention that Baptism is intrinsically tied with regeneration, Uuraas Saarnivaara concludes that salvation must be divided into a two-stage process. The first stage is water baptism which effects, “adoption or reception into the status of a child of God,”<sup>26</sup> and entrance into Christendom. The second part of regeneration is baptism of the Holy Spirit, in which a, “renewal of the heart, or creation of the mind and heart, of a child of God”<sup>27</sup> takes place. Although these often take place simultaneously at baptism, Saarnivaara identifies at least three cases in the New Testament where baptism in the Holy Spirit occurred after baptism,<sup>28</sup> and one where it came before.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Notice that the “unbelieving husband” (*apistos aner*) is sanctified, along with the children.

<sup>26</sup> Saarnivaara, *Scriptural Baptism*, 46.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, 46.

<sup>28</sup> Saarnivaara explains that the disciples, “had received a cleansing bath through the Word [John 15:3] and the baptism by which they had become His disciples.” Saarnivaara, 46.

<sup>29</sup> Acts 10:47.

On the ability for an infant to have a salvation experience, Saarnivaara writes, “our Lord teaches infant faith when He says that they [*paidion* in Mark 10:15 and Luke 18:17] receive the kingdom of God.”<sup>30</sup> Based on this, Saarnivaara reasons that since, “infants receive the kingdom of God, and the Bible shows us no other way by which the kingdom can be received except through faith,”<sup>31</sup> children must be capable of saving faith. Saarnivaara even worries that denying baptism to infants may prevent them entrance into heaven, since unbaptized infants, “are not born of water; and being left without the first thing that belongs to entering into the kingdom of God, they are left outside of it.”<sup>32</sup>

Although logically sound, Saarnivaara’s argument is beset by exegetical difficulties. First, proving infant salvation from Jesus’ words is a dubious enterprise, since baptism is not mentioned in any of these passages. Second, although *paidion* may refer to infants,<sup>33</sup> it never does so in the New Testament, consistently referring instead to young children.<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, Luke records that, “they were bringing even their babies [*brephos*] to Him so that He would touch them,” (Luke 18:15), but Jesus did not call for them; rather he said, “Permit the *children* [*paidion*] to come to Me...” (Luke 18:16, *italics added*).<sup>35</sup> Saarnivaara also runs into serious

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<sup>30</sup> Saarnivaara, *Scriptural Baptism*, 45.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

<sup>33</sup> Properly defined as, “a *childling* (of either sex), that is, (properly) an infant, or (by extension) a half grown *boy* or *girl*; figuratively an *immature* Christian: - (little, young) child, damsel.” James Strong, *Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance*, 1890 [Downloaded] (Rick Meyers, “E-Sword,” 2005).

<sup>34</sup> The New American Standard(r) Updated Edition Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible (Lockman Foundation, 1998) [Downloaded] (Rick Meyers, “E-Sword,” 2005), notes no instances in the NASB where *paidion* is translated as “infant,” while recording one translation as “boy”, and fifty-one translations as variations of “children.”

<sup>35</sup> Whether from ignorance or blatant eisegesis, Saavaara blurs this subtle word play to his advantage, writing, “In the original Greek text the word *brephos*... is used here. This word has, according to the Greek lexicons, only two meanings: an unborn fetus, and a newly born babe, and infant. ...of these babies, *or little children, as they also are called*, Jesus says, ‘Of such is the kingdom of God...’” (*italics added*) Saavaara, 16.

trouble in Acts 8:12-17 – a passage which he actually uses in support of his argument. Luke records that, “when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, . . . were being baptized, men and women alike.” (Acts 8:12) Consistency with Saarnivaara’s theology, however, would imply that these Samaritans were not truly saved until Peter and John came. According to Saavaara, they would be counted among the “foolish virgins” (Matt 25:1-13), and excluded from the kingdom if they had passed away before receiving the Holy Spirit!

Writing from a more evangelically influenced position, Dr. Bob McKelvey teaches that every child of a Christian has the right to be baptized in infancy since, “the blessings come by virtue of the fact that this is a child of the covenant the moment he was born; and baptism is a sign, a seal, an authentication of those blessings, and of the blessings of God that apply to them.”<sup>36</sup> This position has the advantage of a more natural reading of 1Cor 7:14, since the passage conditions *hagiozo* on cohabitation with a believing spouse/parent, rather than baptism. R.R. Osborn concurs, writing baptism brings with it, “a compulsory system of indoctrination in certain well-defined principles,”<sup>37</sup> which is intended/expected to lead towards salvation. Thus, individuals – especially including infants – who are initiated into the church (or “Christendom”) by baptism are made much more capable of hearing the saving message of the Gospel, and of responding favorably to it.

In asserting that baptism is *merely* a sign, seal and authentication of the blessings which *already* apply to a child, McKelvey circumvents the difficulties associated with attempting to begin salvation in infancy, and divide salvation into a two-stage process, while unavoidably

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<sup>36</sup> Dr. Bob McKelvey, “A Case for Infant Baptism, Heb. 8:1-13,” (From a talk given at Providence College, “Signs of Regeneration Conference”),

<sup>37</sup> R.R. Osborn, *Forbid Them Not*, 68.

creating a new one. If baptism is merely an introduction into the visible church, which is distinct from regeneration *per se*, why do scriptures so often tie baptism and salvation together, as the Sacramentalists point out? Although he does not answer this question directly, Leonard J. Vander Zee writes that, “if one starts with the premise of the family as a primary way in which God brings people to faith...then these household baptisms [which, in Vander Zee’s argument, necessarily included infant baptisms] are at least consistent with apostolic understanding and practice.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, by bringing a “covenant child” under the tutorage of the church (which is intended to lead to salvation), baptism really participates in their salvation. In another solution – which ties him almost intrinsically to the evangelical camp – Vander Zee writes that, “faith may be present before baptism, or it may come after baptism, but it always looks back on baptism as a sign and seal of incorporation into Christ’s death and resurrection.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, it is in the subjective reflection of those being regenerated that the past action of baptism is tied to the present moment of salvation.

## V. A New Approach to Baptism: Utilizing God’s Gift for the Church

Vander Zee sees the “great divide” on the sacraments as between “those who understand the sacraments primarily as human actions and those who understand them primarily as God’s actions”.<sup>40</sup> Generally, Evangelicalism sees baptism as man’s work, and Sacramentalism as God’s work, while Covenantalism vacillates between the two extremes, depending on their theological influences.

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<sup>38</sup> Leonard J. Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: Recovering the Sacraments for Evangelical Worship*, (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 126.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 130.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 30.

A different approach is presented by Andrew Purves.<sup>41</sup> In seeing the primary working of God in redemption as being from God *and to* God within the Trinity, Purves has transcended the traditional foci of this debate, while placing a new emphasis on God as the initiator and energy of salvation. Thus, baptism is both God's gift to man, and God's action *through* man, to Himself. As the title of Stookey's book declares, "Baptism [is] Christ's act in the church."<sup>42</sup> Jesus initiated and prescribed baptism, His disciples have continued it, and He is constantly at work within His church, "both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:13). In this way, then, we concur with Luther that, "we ought to understand baptism...just as if Christ himself, nay God himself, baptized us with His own hands,"<sup>43</sup> to bring us to Himself.

With a firm grasp on God as the source and energy of baptism, we may now move on to its purpose. Why did God give us the sacrament of baptism? In his work on Sacraments, John Calvin offers two reasons for them; "The first thing is, that they may contribute to our faith in God; the secondary, that they may attest our confession before men."<sup>44</sup> Vander Zee makes this answer more understandable in his simile on marriage;

Why do we go through all the trouble of the bridal gown, the flowers, the ceremonial march down the aisle? It's not just so much encrusted tradition. The ceremony helps us to see more clearly what is really happening. It's the ideal couple, the man and the woman, who are joined together in a sacred bond before God and human society. [In the same way,] We enact our redemption ritually, just as a man and a woman enact the fundamental commitments and claims of love in their wedding ceremony.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Along with James Torrence, and others.

<sup>42</sup> Stookey, *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church*, 1.

<sup>43</sup> Martin Luther, Woolf, op. cit., vol I, pp. 250off, 259, quoted in R.R. Osborn, *Forbid Them Not: The Importance and History of General Baptism*, (London, England, The Camelot Press Ltd., 1972), 71.

<sup>44</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "On the Sacraments," [document on-line]; available from [http://www.godrules.net/library/calvin/calvin\\_iv\\_iv\\_xv.htm](http://www.godrules.net/library/calvin/calvin_iv_iv_xv.htm); internet; accessed April 12, 2007

<sup>45</sup> Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord's Supper*, 35.

Of course we know that the visible rite of marriage does not create the intangible reality of a loving relationship. A couple forced into marriage for political or social reasons may or may not ever develop real intimacy. Ideally, however, marriage is intended to provide a test, a sign, and (in the subsequent honeymoon) a consummation to the love of the couple, by which it both makes love grow and provides a definite mooring point for it. In whatever difficulties the couple may face together, they may always look back upon, and cling to their marriage rite as the outward sign, which sealed them inseparably together, “till death do we part.” Further, their marriage is a testimony to the world. While common-law relationships generally have few obstacles to separation, married couples find themselves surrounded with massive legal, financial and social disincentives to separate or divorce.

The rite of marriage, therefore, signifies and seals the love which is already present in a couple, while calling the world to hold the couple accountable to their marriage vows. In this regard, God’s gift of marriage parallels God’s gift of baptism, since baptism too is “an external sign, by which the Lord seals on our consciences his promises of good-will toward us, in order to sustain the weakness of our faith, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him, both before himself, and before angels as well as men.”<sup>46</sup>

When it is understood that God gives us the gift of baptism, for the purpose of strengthening our faith and testifying to the world, it is much easier to determine *how* baptism works. Against Sacramentalist tendencies, it must be argued that a genuine personal relationship with God is the only means by which we can understand salvation to occur. Against Evangelicalism, however, it must also be argued that Biblical baptism was intended to really participate in the salvation experience, rather than simply testifying to it. As Stookey writes,

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<sup>46</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

“Baptism is not merely an audiovisual aid, soon forgotten. It is a sign that brings to pass, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the very identity it proclaims.”<sup>47</sup> To return to the simile of marriage, a wedding is not intended to be merely, “an audiovisual aid,” but a real agent, which creates the new reality of wedlock. Like a wedding ceremony performed over a common-law marriage, the common practice of separating baptism from salvation emasculates the symbol of its intended force.

Perhaps the best illustration for the evangelical mind is in the “sacrament” of the altar call.<sup>48</sup> Although it is technically possible for an individual have an entirely internal salvation experience, history has taught us that the altar-call has a solidifying effect on faith. In the critical moments before deciding to walk to the front, a momentous battle is fought; questions of, “should I walk forward?” “what if \_\_\_ sees?” and, “shat will \_\_\_ think?” tumble around inside one’s head. In the first action of standing and in each faltering step, faith is tested, and, in passing the test, grows steadily stronger. In reaching the altar and entering into prayer with others, one feels that they are really being embraced into a new community. The sweaty hands, the whispered words of instruction and comfort, the sinner’s prayer, spoken aloud through faltering lips, and the warm embraces and tears all create a powerful sense of belonging, and an indelible impression on the memory. Years later, a struggling Christian may still look back with hope on the day of their salvation, knowing that, “I was saved when I went forward at \_\_\_\_\_ meeting, and said the sinners prayer at \_\_\_:\_\_\_ PM,” while (hopefully) being encouraged by the Christian community into which he has been inducted by his altar-call.

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<sup>47</sup> Stookey, *Baptism*, 26.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Vander Zee, *Christ, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*, 35, where Vander Zee identifies worship songs and altar calls as the new sacraments of evangelicalism.

In exploring the New Testament, Baptism seems intended to operate in much the same role as the present-day altar-call. Rather than a prize awarded to the most worthy (and least needy) of the faith, baptism was given to all, immediately upon conversion. Its intent was to aid faith by creating a definitive event, a powerful symbol to fix the matter once and for all – to the individual, and to the world – that this is now God’s child. In consistency with New Testament teaching, we must strive to bring our practice of baptism as close as we can to this intent. With that in mind, we move on to the final and most controversial section of this paper, the “who” of baptism.

In using the altar call as an example for baptism, above, it may seem that I have excluded the possibility of infant baptism from this discussion. That is not entirely true. Through my study of this issue, it has become increasingly apparent that there are almost no scriptures which directly address the specific issues of administering baptism. Short of specifics, I am left to evaluate baptismal practice by my theology of baptism, which states that, “As God’s gift to the church, baptism is an invaluable aid to saving faith.” From this thesis, then, we must ask the question, “Can baptism in infancy, be an aid to faith?” The answer to that question lies almost entirely in one’s worldview.

Stories are often heard from the mission field of how a relatively small group of the leaders, elders, witch-doctors, (etc.) within a tribal village turns to Christ, and the entire village follows their decision of faith. In these cases, the world-view of the tribal peoples included some form of abdication of decision-making to their leaders. In an environment of such communal thinking,<sup>49</sup> could not the sacrament of infant baptism be tied to Covenantal theology to create a powerful aid to saving faith?

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<sup>49</sup> Although a tenuous supposition, it may be added that this form of thinking was more prevalent in the pre-Reformation world, in which infant baptism was instituted.

It may be true that the New Testament example lends itself most easily to believer's baptism, but neither does it expressly forbid infant baptism. Both have been present and useful throughout the history of the church. If both are allowed, we must ask the question, "which best meets our current needs, as a church?"

Currently, the North American Church is in the midst of a crisis, in which it is losing its children at a disastrous rate. Ironically, the very emphasis on crisis conversion which filled her pews in the previous century is now emptying them! The North American church has forgotten that there is a way to be saved other than through a crisis conversion. This lack has led to a paradoxical position of anxiety and negligence on the part of Christian parents, and insecurity and shame on the part of the children. Why is it that a child of the church constantly feels that their faith is second-rate, or suspect until they have backslidden for a time? Why is it that, rather than glorying in the blessings of their upbringing, testimonies which lack the sensationalism of sin often feel compelled to begin, "Well, I really don't have a testimony, but..."? What impetus is needed to correct this flaw, to teach parents of the essential responsibility *and power* which they have over their children, to "bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4), rather than treating them as "heathen until proven otherwise"?

I am not yet ready to practice or prescribe baptism, both because of the benefits of believer's baptism and because of the dangers which Sacramentalism carries in an individualistic society. For parents who see infant baptism as a means of incorporating a child into the church, however, and of pledging to definitely support and lead their child towards baptism, I cannot but offer my blessing.

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