

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

BAPTISTS AND THE CURRENT DEBATE ON BAPTISM

This paper aims to help Baptists answer the question from the British Council of Churches Belfast Assembly (1979) which asked churches "to consider how far the two classic patterns of Christian initiation can be seen as acceptable alternatives". One pattern consists of infant baptism, nurture in the Christian community, confirmation/reception into full membership upon profession of faith, and admission to communion. The other pattern consists of thanksgiving for childbirth and dedication of parents, nurture in the Christian community, baptism upon profession of faith, and admission to communion.

Of all the questions in the current debate this has emerged as the crucial one. It has been posed in a variety of contexts such as the Joint Liturgical Group's *Initiation and Eucharist* (1972), the Churches' Unity Commission's Proposition 5. (1976), the World Council of Churches Faith and Order Paper 84 (1977), and the Theological Conversations between the Baptist World Alliance and World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1973-77).

An honest attempt to answer this question will lead Baptists to all the central issues. By positing infant baptism alongside believers' baptism this question immediately exposes what Baptists really believe, and calls forth a lively theology. Strangely, Baptists have often seemed to need just such a pressure to formulate their theology of baptism, like the inhabitants of a beautiful city who never examine their city's attractions until visitors come. G. R. Beasley-Murray refers to this paradox (*Baptism Today and Tomorrow*, 1966): "Baptists have been prepared to fight to the death about baptism ... and yet they have been and still are extraordinarily slow in committing themselves to a theology of baptism".

Furthermore, this question embraces all the vital issues involved in baptism such as faith, conversion, ecclesiology, church membership and the theology of childhood. Properly answered it will not allow us to evade the vexed question of so-called "rebaptism". Lastly, the sheer practicality of this question shaped by today's reality should prevent any "ostrich-like attitude" like the Baptist position Gilmore described as "blissfully waiting for the day when everyone becomes a Baptist, or when Baptists have ceased completely to count" (in *Baptism and Christian Unity*, 1960).

The route this paper will take is partly descriptive. It is important to familiarize ourselves with recent Baptist thinking and the developments within it that help to answer this paper's question. The first section therefore gives a summary of the main trends of the last twenty years. There should also be an awareness of those situations where Christians are already attempting to combine the two patterns

of Christian initiation in Local Ecumenical Projects and Union Churches in Britain, and this comprises the second section. Finally, there must be an attempt to sharpen up the key issues for us to face today in the light of the opening question.

A. TWO DECADES OF BAPTIST THINKING ON BAPTISM

"Baptist thinking" refers to the published material of Baptist theologians during this period. What is offered in this summary is not necessarily a reflection of the average Baptist view but of the theological trends in Baptist writing.

The period under review begins with *Christian Baptism* (ed. A. Gilmore, 1959) and concludes appropriately with the Faith and Order Consultation, Louisville (1979). Appropriately because through these past twenty years the momentum of ecumenical discussion has involved Baptists in the Joint Liturgical Group (JLG), the Churches' Unity Commission (CUC), the British Council of Churches (BCC), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Reformed/Baptist theological conversations (RB).

The substantial volume *Christian Baptism* was a significant beginning. Not only was this a rare occurrence among Baptists of a group of scholars and ministers working together, but it also acted as a springboard both for the scholars who have been responsible for most of the subsequent thinking as well as for several of the main themes of the following two decades. It fathered a further composite volume *The Pattern of the Church* (ed. A. Gilmore, 1963); and several individuals developed particular aspects of the issue, notably R. E. O. White, *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation* (1960), G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (1962), A. Gilmore, *Baptism and Christian Unity* (1966). In these, and other writings, we note certain general trends in Baptist thinking.

1. *Consensus rather than polemic*

Undeniably the whole mood of the baptismal debate has been changing in these last two decades. For much of its history the debate has been bitterly divisive with both sides engaged in a kind of trench warfare as they fired salvos of texts at each other. (See Himbury's "Baptismal Controversies 1640-1900" in *Christian Baptism*). The conflict raged on in this century with such protagonists as E. Brunner (1938), K. Barth (1943), O. Cullmann (1949), J. Jeremias (1949, 1960), and M. Barth (1951).

Today the polemic has lessened. In general both sides have agreed that neither can win outright victory by the brandishing of Scripture or church history. The issues are too complex and are embedded in the on-going church which practises both believers' baptism and infant baptism with strong convictions about their respective biblical theologies. There is a mood of realism which G. R. Beasley-Murray identifies in *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* - "the crucial point is not the mode of entry into the church, but the fact that the church

exists, and that people enter it and in Christ by the Holy Spirit participate in redemption despite varying modes of initiation".

Most Baptist theologians have included critiques of infant baptism during this period, and there have been some specific examinations as in R. Mason's *An examination of recent apologetic for paedo-baptism* (an unpublished Oxford B.D. thesis, 1963). In general there has been a marked attitude of humility. Where infant baptism apologetic has indicated defective practice and inadequate theology among Baptists there has been rigorous self-criticism. Nowhere is this clearer than over the casual relationship between baptism and church membership, which in some "open membership" churches has even allowed membership for some who have never been baptised at all. There has also been condemnation of indiscriminate baptism by both sides of the debate. The Faith and Order Consultation at Louisville (1979) recorded in section 5: "The conviction that indiscriminate baptism is seen as an abuse to be eliminated". In his article which accompanies the report of the Louisville Consultation (*Baptist Quarterly*, January 1980), W. M. S. West points out that this conviction refers not only to indiscriminate infant baptism, but also to indiscriminate believers' baptism. Justifiable criticism on such issues has been humbly received by many Baptists.

With the lessening of polemic has come an attempt at consensus. The Faith and Order Consultation at Louisville (1979) mentions two areas of consensus in its first point of agreement:

The acceptance that believers' baptism is the most clearly attested practice of baptism in the New Testament, together with the recognition that infant baptism has developed within the Christian tradition and witness to valid Christian insights.

The first area of consensus is in New Testament scholarship. G. R. Beasley-Murray writes of a "quiet revolution in New Testament scholarship". In *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* he comments: "It is common knowledge that most critical scholars who work in the field of New Testament studies agree that there is no evidence in the New Testament writings for the practice of infant baptism in the primitive church". Yet, the second area of consensus concerns the validity of certain Christian insights evident in Infant Baptism. (It should be stressed that the Louisville statement does not speak of valid Christian *baptismal* insights but rather a consensus on the strength of other theological truths evident in Infant Baptism). Time and time again when Baptist expositors have made their point, often tellingly, they have to declare certain values in infant baptism. One of the most generous is R. E. O. White who declares that infant baptism expresses better the prevenience of divine grace, harmonises better with the biblical doctrine of covenant, preserves better the corporate and objective aspects of salvation and safeguards better the idea of divine action within the soul, than believers' baptism does (in *Biblical Doctrine of Initiation*).

There also seems to be a remarkable agreement in words on the meaning of baptism as summed up in the WCC Faith and Order Paper 84:

The central meaning of baptism is incorporation in Christ and participation in his death and resurrection. In baptism, the Spirit of Pentecost both gives and is given, so that we are united to Christ and with each other. Baptism is fundamental and constitutive for membership in the Body of Christ and cannot be conceived apart from faith, personal commitment and lifelong growth.

These three interdependent sentences sum up the Baptist theology to which we turn shortly, and command the agreement of most paedo-Baptists.

To these areas of consensus we may add further issues where there is much common ground, as in the understanding of Christian Initiation as a process (see section 4 below). Clearly, this irenic mood enables former protagonists at the very least to consider how the two "classic patterns of Christian initiation" can be seen as "acceptable alternatives". But a loud warning must be sounded. Some of the agreement is dangerously like thin ice which will crack under pressure.

There are still some protagonists waging an aggressive war. On the British scene some Church of Scotland theologians have asserted that infant baptism is the normative pattern of baptism. And it is to be suspected that the "average Baptist view" is far less generous to infant baptism than that of R. E. O. White above.

The greatest danger, however, arises from the almost common language both sides can employ about the meaning of baptism. Those sentences above from FO 84 relate to a common understanding of that to which biblical baptism points. But such a theological consensus is in danger of being so far removed from the actual practices that far from achieving progress it is masking the real problems. Its verbal agreement may obscure the vital question whether infant baptism can bear the weight of New Testament baptismal theology - a question to which we shall return.

2. *New Testament theology rather than New Testament practice*

Though *Christian Baptism* examined baptismal doctrine from Biblical and historical viewpoints, the most significant section was the last on the theology of baptism by N. Clark. Prophetically he declared: "The way ahead lies in the recognition that the overriding appeal must always be to New Testament theology rather than New Testament practice".

Baptism is a "concertina word" which has been variously squeezed or expanded in its history. Clark's article marked a widening of baptismal theology which subsequent Baptist writers have accepted. Flemington's definition of baptism as "the kerygma in action" has been adopted so that baptism

can never be related simply to any one christological moment, whether the incarnation or the cross, but to the whole redemptive action of God in Christ involving incarnation, baptism, cross, resurrection and ascension. Baptism signifies the dynamic incorporation of the believer into the church living in tension between Pentecost and Parousia. Baptism can never therefore be regarded solely as a rite, but as a locus which God has chosen for the fullness of his saving grace to be made known in believers. There God meets man, grace meets faith, blessing meets obedience, the individual is engrafted into the corporate, the spiritual is joined with the material. It is this depth of meaning that lies behind the act of baptism.

Of course there were antecedents for this fuller theology. Cullmann, for example, (*Baptism in the New Testament* (1950)) argued that the baptismal issue "must be decided on the ground of New Testament doctrine". It is not enough just to refer to Matthew 28.19 which gives only the command to baptize without any explanation for the connection between Christian baptism and the person and work of Jesus Christ. (Probably it is true to say that many Baptists had argued hitherto it was enough!). Cullmann therefore linked Jesus' saying about his future baptism and suffering (Mark 10.38, Luke 12.50) with Pauline teaching about participation in the death and resurrection of Christ (e.g. Romans 6.1 ff) to develop a theology of baptism as relating to the completed work of Jesus on the cross. We see Baptists developing this in ways that Cullmann might not have envisaged in his argument for infant baptism.

The implications of this fuller theology are startling. As Clark states in *Christian Baptism*: "To attempt to delineate the structure of baptismal theology is at once to be driven back to the more basic doctrines, to questions of christology, ecclesiology and eschatology". We may add, in the light of the "charismatic movement", pneumatology also.

The following two sections on baptism as sacrament and initiation flow directly out of this deepened theology and will touch upon some of these basic doctrines.

It should be noted at this point that this emphasis on theology has both positive and negative effects on this paper's question. Sharing theological insights should help both sides of the debate. Certainly Baptists have benefited from other theological emphases such as the primacy of grace, the place of the corporate, and the role of faith. Baptists have been pushed into developing a theology of childhood as the inadequacies of the theology of the "dedication service" have been exposed and the special relationship of believers and their children within the body of Christ has been explored.

Yet, inevitably, the profounder understanding of baptism exposes the inadequacies of infant baptism. Clark concluded that paedobaptism is a practice in search of a theology (*Christian Baptism*) and Beasley-Murray (*Baptism Today and Tomorrow*) claims that most British paedobaptists acknowledge

frankly that infant baptism cannot bear the *same* meaning as believers' baptism. At best infant baptism must be shown to have a *related* meaning only. In spite of the apparent consensus of section 1 an examination of the theology of baptism reveals an intense divide. Indeed for Beasley-Murray it leads to no alternative but the acceptance by both sides that two different baptisms have developed in place of one. Such a conclusion will be examined in the last section of this paper, but it acts as a testimony that there will be no easy theological consensus, once the profound significance of New Testament baptism has been investigated.

3. *Sacrament rather than symbol*

It follows from the deepened theological content of baptism, and the dimension of grace as the Holy Spirit both gives and is given in baptism, that Baptist theologians have asserted baptism to be a sacrament rather than a symbol. This claim has sometimes been couched in the strongest of terms. For example, R. E. O. White (1960) scathingly attacks the purely symbolic picture of baptism as an "attenuated parable rite" and calls for a recovery of the dynamic sacramentalism associated with baptism in the New Testament where "divine activity and human response meet in sacramental action". Thus, for him, "the sacrament consists not in the thing done, but in the *doing* of that which gives expression to faith in appointed ways". Similarly G. R. Beasley-Murray (1962) repudiates the view that sacramentalism is some impersonal magic: "Grace offered in baptism is no impersonal influence, injected through material substances, but the gracious action of God himself". Bridge and Phipers in *The Water that divides* (1977) sum up the section called "Symbol or Sacrament": "In the New Testament baptism without faith is dead, achieving nothing. Faith without baptism is incomplete, for through baptism God conveys to the believer all that is granted him in Christ". The degree and forcefulness of this unanimity is as striking as its departure from much past thinking.

Much traditional Baptist theology has seen baptism as primarily a confessing or declaratory ordinance. The Particular Baptists refused to see baptism as more than a symbol of death, resurrection and new birth for the believer. This view was best expressed by John Bunyan: "I find not that baptism is a sign to any but the person baptized". (*Differences in judgment about water baptism no bar to Communion*). This view had led to a casual relationship with church membership (see next section), and runs the danger of so emphasizing the interior meaning of baptism that it becomes a purely external rite.

Several important issues are raised here. It is probably true that the "average Baptist view" today remains a "symbolic" one, and this trend in Baptist theological writing calls for renewed study within our denomination. John F. Matthews (in *Baptism: a Baptist View*, 1976) is right when he poses to Baptists the central question: "Does anything actually happen at baptism?" The subjective answer is often "Yes", but what

really matters is that objectively baptism marks a high-point of a relationship of faith and commitment at which the believer is incorporated into Christ's body and experiences a significant encounter with the Holy Spirit. Clearly, many Baptists will have suspicion because of the term "sacrament" which may be deemed priestly or magical, but a diligent and open study of Scripture will reveal that there is an objective aspect to baptism. Everything that is attributed to faith can be attributed to baptism also: union with Christ, participation in his death and resurrection, sonship of God, giving of the Spirit, inheritance of the Kingdom and salvation. Alongside "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2.8a) is set "Baptism now saves you" (1 Peter 3.21).

It should also be mentioned at this point that the influence of the so-called "charismatic movement" has provoked renewed thinking on the sacramental aspect of baptism. P. Fiddes (*Charismatic Renewal: a Baptist view*, 1980) argues that Baptists have often failed to contribute to the theology of the Holy Spirit because "of an impoverished understanding of water-baptism itself". Baptism in the Spirit belongs normatively within the event of baptism and Fiddes suggests that the encounter with the Holy Spirit should be expressed in the laying on of hands. A few Baptists have always practised the laying on of hands, and perhaps the fuller doctrine of the Holy Spirit will help develop the sacramental aspect of baptism.

4. *Initiatory rather than conclusive*

Over the last twenty years Baptist theologians have increasingly viewed baptism as only one part of a *process* in which the believer is incorporated into Christ's living church. Baptism should never be regarded as an isolated event completing the believer's inner experience. Rather it belongs to the total rite of Christian initiation and is vitally connected to first communion and church membership. E. A. Payne in *Baptists and Christian Initiation* (*Baptist Quarterly*, October 1975) maintains this is no innovation since he finds the same integration of baptism, the Lord's Supper, and laying on of hands in some seventeenth century Baptist confessions.

The very question with which this paper began assumes that Baptists share with paedo-Baptists the principle of initiation as a process. There are several significant issues which must be faced.

Firstly, any act of initiation presupposes an ecclesiology and Baptists have a fundamentally different understanding of the church from paedo-Baptist communions. The Baptist belief in the church as a "gathered fellowship of believers" heightens the significance of baptism in conversion-initiation. Yet this "gathered church" seems irreconcilable with the *Volkskirche* and its infant baptism. This difference is so basic that it produces a swift stalemate. This is noticeable in various theological conversations as between the Baptist World Alliance and

the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (1973-77) where a "mutual questioning of ecclesiologies" merely underlined the differences between Baptist "personalism" and the Reformed "community aspect" of the church. Similarly, W. M. S. West (*Baptist Quarterly*, January 1980) comments that the Louisville Consultation did not discuss the points of difference in ecclesiology. Such differences will always underlie any agreement about initiation as a process.

Secondly, the structure of the process of initiation has not only theological and liturgical aspects, but also psychological. The JLG, of which Clark is a member, spelt out the theology and liturgy of initiation in *Initiation and Eucharist* (1972). It stressed a theological understanding of baptism as having the complex meaning of the total redemptive action of God (as in section 2, above) and the totality of the rite of initiation from baptism to eucharist. The psychological aspect of initiation, in its relationship to the development of child to adult has also been considered by several Baptist writers in this period.

Baptist repudiation of infant baptism raised huge questions about the relation of children to church, baptism and the gospel. M. Walker has shown (*Baptist Quarterly*, April 1966) that seventeenth century General and Particular Baptists were not slow to consider these questions. In these last twenty years there has also been some serious thinking about a theology of childhood. Clark in *Christian Baptism* re-emphasized the distinctions between believers (and their children) and unbelievers (and their children), as well as between believers and their infant children. He saw the "one flesh" of Christian marriage as providing the link between children of Christian parents and the body of Christ (see "one flesh", Ephesians 5.31-32). The Baptist "Dedication Service" is deemed to be a response to meet this truth, though its significance lies not in the human responses of the parents, but the declaration of the divine act as God's grace relates the child to the community.

Baptists have made various attempts to examine how God's grace relates the child to the community. The B. U. Report *The Child and the Church* (1966) argued for the catechumenate which includes adults as well as children who are "in preparation" for full membership of the church. D. Tennant in *Children in the Church: a Baptist view* (1978) has introduced the "nurture model" of current Christian education thinking to formulate a specific Christian view of childhood. He contends that "children are persons in their own right" and that you cannot justifiably make adulthood superior to childhood for they are both equally valid stages in the process of becoming. Hitherto Baptists have tended to see spiritual learning in terms of the *cognitive* with baptism marking the point at which the individual can *understand*. But Tennant argues that the "nurture model" stresses instead the *affective* dimension of learning, and provides an understanding of personhood in which all (children and adults) are in preparation for growth as continuous. Obviously, within this process

there are many decisions, but Tennant asks (*Fraternal*, October 1979) which is the baptismal one? Is an individual's readiness for baptism and church membership to be determined by intellectual, cognitive, emotional, ethical or age criteria? An awareness of the affective dimension of learning, and the importance of nurture in families and homes, has led Tennant to an appreciation of infant baptism (*Children in the Church*). In the section "Let's listen" he recognises that "the strength of the practice lies in the recognition by the church of the special importance of families and homes, of believing parents and the process beginning in birth and baptism through which these children will be led to acknowledge Jesus as Lord and join his church".

Some Baptists have gone much further in their appreciation of infant baptism, and have made specific attempts at a rapprochement between believers' baptism and infant baptism. Taking infant baptism at its best, administered only to children of believing parents, T. Bergsten (*Baptist Quarterly*, July 1959) argued that infant baptism is a "church building factor" and cannot be denied as a baptism. V. Hayward (*Baptist Quarterly*, April 1967) concluded that there are two different ways of entering the church by conversion or by birth into a believing family, and that these testify to two different types of faith and therefore two different kinds of baptisms. He pleaded that if Baptists and paedo-Baptists agree on infant baptism in believing households *only* then believers' baptism would become the norm for all other entry.

An even more controversial view was advanced by H. Willmer (*Fraternal*, February 1976) in "Twice-baptised Christians - a way forward for Church reform and unity". He claimed each baptism testifies to different truths: infant baptism to the ultimacy of God's grace in the salvation of humanity, and believers' baptism to the repentance and faith of the believer incorporated into the church. Both forms of baptism relate to the individual's pilgrimage from the unconscious passive level of infancy to the conscious individualist level of adulthood. He questioned why baptism should be performed only once to each person when it claims to be a complete initiatory rite. Infant baptism and believers' baptism can co-exist within the individual's spiritual development.

Clearly, for some, this developing theology of childhood within initiation makes bold claims to resolve the question with which this paper began. But immediately we must pass on to the third significant issue in this section. In these last twenty years there has also been a strong emphasis on the "once-for-allness" of baptism. In *Christian Baptism* Clark made the strong statement that "rebaptism as believers of those who have received baptism in infancy constitutes a blow at the heart of the Christian faith". Most Baptists would refuse to repeat believers' baptism no matter how earnest any special pleading might be, but a growing number of Baptists are also unhappy about baptizing those baptized in infancy. The logic for baptism as a decisive initiatory sacrament is compelling: because it initiates (into Christ, into the church,

into the new life) it cannot be repeated. A person is either baptized or unbaptized, and once baptized cannot become unbaptized. Clearly, this strong emphasis on the *ephapax* of baptism cannot countenance any suggestion such as that of Willmer above. It is exactly this logic that produces huge tensions not only with the various decisions implicit in the initiation process but also pastorally for the Baptist minister faced with a request from someone baptized as an infant who now wishes believers' baptism. To such tensions we shall return in section 3.

B. CONTEMPORARY EXPERIMENTS

The baptismal debate has not been restricted to books and theological conversation. The increased mobility between denominations and the advent of ecumenical projects has meant that lay-people are being caught in the tension of the baptismal controversy. Bridge and Phipers begin their book *The Water that Divides* (1977) with four case studies of people hurt by the baptismal debate, including not only Anglicans moving into a Baptist church, but vice-versa. The growth of Local Ecumenical Projects has given practical working experiments because the two classic patterns of baptism have to be practised within the one local congregation. Also there are a number of Union Churches within England where Baptists are sharing with other denominations. J. Nicholson (*Baptist Quarterly*, April 1980) reports from the TAP Register (Teams and projects) of September 1979, that in 22 cases Baptists share with Anglicans and others, in 8 cases simply with the United Reformed Church, 2 with Methodists, 1 with the Congregational Federation and in 5 with Methodists and URC. Most of these have a sponsoring body which is responsible for deciding upon issues raised in each project such as baptism.

The most grievous issue, of course, is the matter of so-called "rebaptism" when someone baptized as an infant later requests believers' baptism. Bridge and Phipers recommend pastoral compromise as the solution with believers' baptism being given to people already baptized as infants only as a last resort to meet the candidates' consciences. In general, this is the stance taken by the LEPs also.

Overall there has been both pragmatism and charity. The interim statement from the Swindon Central Churches (*Living with two forms of baptism*, 1976) claims it is possible for two forms of baptism to exist side-by-side but "it helps if nothing is written down". Although if asked to baptize someone who had previously been baptized in infancy they consider that "in no case is a second baptism necessary", nonetheless there are other considerations. These are listed as the nature of their infant baptism (was it indiscriminate without believing parents?); the reasons for a public witness; the considerations which have led to the request; the effect on the fellowship of churches. Clearly, there is a possibility of a "second baptism", as is also reported from Mossborough, Sheffield and Beaumont Leys, Leicester. Whaddon Way, Bletchley, however, rejects the possibility because it "would deny the validity of their infant baptism".

Several of these congregations have sought to give the options right at the beginning of the initiation process when parents bring their babies to church. The LEP at Bowthorpe has an explanatory leaflet for parents entitled "Bowthorpe Babies". First it invites parents to a simple Dedication Service with the explanation: "there is also a growing number who are convinced Christians (such as Baptists) who prefer a Dedication Service for their babies. They believe baptism should wait until the children are old enough to decide for themselves to follow Christ". Only after this explanation is the possibility of infant baptism mentioned. At Blackbird Leys, Oxford, all parents of new-born children are invited to a session in which three choices are offered to them: standard infant baptism, thanksgiving for the child and dedication of the parents with the same promises as in baptism, or a naming and blessing service with no commitment from the parents. All three forms occur within a liturgy for the "Celebration of the gift of life". However, in spite of the carefully presented options, the great majority of parents still opt for infant baptism.

It was partly in response to these difficulties in LEPs that the BCC organised a consultation on "Christian initiation" (1979). It is worth noting two particular issues raised in that conference.

First, there was an important paper on the interaction of baptismal practice and social and political factors. D. M. Thompson in this paper (*Baptism: some historical and social considerations*) asked for a theological appraisal of such influences upon baptism as the effect of "revivalist preaching". He suggested that there is a vital distinction between the problem of "rebaptism" as it arises when a person baptized in infancy but not brought up in a Christian context asks for believers' baptism upon being converted to Christianity, and the problem as it arises when an already active Christian seeks believers' baptism as a kind of confirmation of a new experience. Clearly the former has a far stronger case for a so-called "second baptism". Incidentally, it is exactly this kind of pressure that has meant requests for a second baptism *within* the Anglican church. Buchanan (*One Baptism Once*, 1979) notes the trend of some Anglicans seeking a "rebaptism" who are being encouraged by the clergy to remain Anglicans and still be "rebaptized" - a position he rejects completely.

Socio-historical factors do call for serious examination. The Louisville Consultation (1979) Group IV examined "Contextuality" - baptism in relation to context. Drawing on examples across the world this section of the report challenges the churches to "rethink both paedobaptist and believer-baptist practices (including modes) in the perspective of the missionary nature of the church". On the British scene the break-up of family life and the mobility of family units pose huge threats to past ideas of nurture within the Christian family which have been essential to infant baptism. The power of

social convention remains important in the choices, for example of the mothers in LEPs. And the declining number of parents interested enough to bring babies into church suggests a developing missionary situation for a new generation where believers' baptism has a larger role.

The consultation also considered a specific proposal to resolve the issue of so-called rebaptism. It stated that "the major answer to this particular question lay in a much greater stress by all churches on the renewal of baptismal vows". Though such vows could be taken in the context of a communion service the need was recognised for specific services for renewal. A small group within the BCC reviewed various options and paid particular attention to the "rite of renewal" produced by the Doctrine Committee of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, under pressure from individuals who had experienced charismatic renewal. (See also R. L. Child, *Conversation about Baptism*, 1963). This rite actually uses immersion which begs the whole question of how different this renewal of baptismal vows is from an act of baptism. Nevertheless, the question of renewal of baptismal vows gives scope for further exploration of some common ground between the two classic patterns of Christian initiation.

It is obvious that the LEPs provide no easy answers. To leave the issue of the relationship between the two forms of baptism to pastoral pragmatism resolves nothing. This is true of other attempts at pastoral compromise. The Church of North India resolved to leave any requests for "rebaptism" to the bishop of the particular diocese involved. In June 1978 the Bishop of Patna (an ex-Anglican), because he believed in the total efficacy of infant baptism, forbade the pastor of Patna Union Church (an ex-Baptist) to rebaptize two people. Similarly, the early discussions between the Churches of Christ and the United Reformed Church sought refuge in a pastoral footnote. In their report (1974) this footnote proposed the question of "rebaptism" was to be handled pastorally. In the Interim Report (1975) they found nothing is that simple! Many in the URC wished to delete the footnote believing that "what is theologically wrong cannot be pastorally right". We must conclude that pastoral compromise can never bear the weight of bridge-building necessary between the two classic forms of baptism.

C. A WAY AHEAD?

The question with which this paper began must now be faced. The background has been sketched out both in terms of Baptist thinking and the contemporary ecumenical scene. Is there any way in which a Baptist can see the two classic patterns of Christian initiation as acceptable alternatives? The idea of Christian initiation as a process, in which baptism in water is but a part, was referred to in section A4. This paper's question presumes that though there is a variety of order

within the two patterns there are, nonetheless, all the vital elements present in both.

Baptists must address themselves to several issues in our response to this question:

1. *Do we have the will to work for a solution?*

This fundamental question about attitude is vital for Baptists because of the strength of our position. We have a scripturally-sound, theologically-full sacrament of which we are rightly proud and through which we seek to extend Christ's kingdom at his command. As W. M. S. West comments on the Louisville Consultation (*Baptist Quarterly*, January 1980) no longer are Baptists just a minority "awkward squad" in ecumenical discussions. On the other side we recognise, however, that infant baptism has a rich heritage and many fine Christian minds arguing its apologetic. The scandal of the divided church, in which both practices are embedded, remains. Both sides should agree with R. L. Child (*A Conversation about baptism*, 1963) that "nobody can now truthfully maintain, in the light of Christian history, that the blessing of God has been denied to any section of his people on the ground that they have (or have not) been using a particular form of baptism". In humility we must see that God has accepted the witness and service of both parties to this controversy and we should be willing to work for a solution.

2. *What kind of relationship do these two classic patterns have?*

No-one will deny that the two patterns of initiation have developed through different theological insights, ecclesiology and contexts. We have already noted various attempts to relate the two.

There is the Biblical relationship which Hayward advanced (*Baptist Quarterly*, 1967) in which he placed both forms of baptism within the New Testament. Developing the principles of the "household of faith" (Galatians 6.10) with its corporate faith, he wrote of the richness of New Testament theology allowing for vicarious faith and the reality of the child's faith. Most Baptists would agree with G. R. Beasley-Murray's rejection of this thesis (*Baptist Quarterly*, 1967) and would underline the profound significance of baptism in the New Testament for believers together with the scant evidence for infant-baptism.

There is the psychological relationship suggested by Wilmer (*Fraternal*, February 1976) with both forms of baptism testifying to different truths for the individual's development from childhood to adulthood. Allied to this we find the "nurture school" developing the Baptist theology of childhood. Though this dimension is important, especially in its implications for a catechumenate, it scarcely illumines the relation between infant and believers' baptism.

There is the historical relationship. G. R. Beasley-Murray (*Baptism: Today and Tomorrow*, 1966) argued that the differences arose in church history through the maladministration of baptism. He states that if the two sides accept that two baptisms

have developed in place of one this would prove the most important step for the renewal of the churches.

In terms of fact this maybe is true and it explains the illogicality of two patterns of initiation in a church claiming "one baptism". Indeed, we may view this illogicality as part of the illogicality of different denominations within "one church". Yet this should be seen not negatively but as positively as possible, for it speaks of a theological pluralism which God has blessed.

Is it possible to declare that there is a rich theological relationship between the two classic patterns rooted in the breadth of man's experience of God and response to him? The wealth of Biblical theology, the different understandings of the church and the influence of context have enabled rich developments in initiation which do not complement each other in a logical way, nor relate to a simple sequence. Yet, from the overarching perspective of God's activity in Christ and our response as individuals and communities the two patterns are related at a profound level. The depths of conviction on both sides are not diminished, nor are the responsibilities Baptists bear for continuing to develop their baptismal theology and share it with the wider church, but this relationship is dynamic and is bound up with God's whole purpose for his church.

3. *What measure of comparability do the two patterns have?*

Placing the two *patterns* side-by-side avoids straight comparison between the two baptismal *rites* on their own. The advantages of this are obvious. For example, to take an issue raised earlier, few Baptists if any could agree that infant baptism on its own can bear the weight of New Testament believers' baptism. But when infant baptism is set within a process which includes a specific profession of faith later there is a much greater scope for comparison.

It is this issue of the faith-response of the believer that Baptists will probably regard as the most significant point of comparison. Indeed many will recognise it as the determinative point within the process. This is not to simplify the relationship of grace and faith, which are two sides of the same thing, nor to devalue believers' baptism which we believe is "the divinely appointed rendezvous of grace for faith" (G. R. Beasley-Murray: *Baptism in the New Testament*). But we must admit, especially in view of the theological perspective sketched out above, that believers' baptism is not necessary for salvation. There is a valid meeting of faith with grace in the other pattern of Christian initiation when the individual's personal commitment is made in confirmation or reception into full membership upon profession of faith.

Baptists will want to insist that both initiation patterns are completed only in the personal commitment of the believer. Clearly, believers' baptism is much more able to express this commitment to Christ, not only biblically but because it is

less socially conventional and occurs later in psychological and spiritual development than say confirmation usually does.

Considerable further thought, however, needs to be given to the distinction between faith and personal commitment to which W. M. S. West refers (*Baptist Quarterly*, 1980). The problem focuses on the paedo-Baptist who having undergone Christian initiation now believes that he made no personal faith-response within it. Section B's reference to socio-historical factors instanced this problem of the paedo-Baptist who under, for example, "revivalist preaching" wishes to make a definite faith-response. There must be an adequate opportunity for such specific commitment to complete the infant-baptism process of initiation. Probably this could be provided in a special service for the renewal of baptismal vows and such a possibility should be actively pursued in today's debate.

All this has fundamental implications for the *ephapax*, the once-for-allness of Christian initiation. If the faith-response of the individual is determinative is it possible in the placing of the different water-rites within their processes that the once-for-allness can be applied to the total process on either side, with both culminating in a faith-response as the believer is incorporated into Christ's church? The once-for-allness of the process leading to true incorporation into Christ would then depend not on the administration of water but on its completeness, with the individual's faith-response having a vital part.

4. *Is there any way forward on the so-called "rebaptism" issue?*

Inevitably, there are going to be some individuals caught in the profound illogicality of these different baptismal processes. In each case there will be complex pastoral factors. The very illogicality of relationship could invalidate the concept of "rebaptism" because of the differences between the two water-rites. Setting them within their processes of initiation, and under the blessing of God we should seek, however, to reconcile this particular division of Christ's body in irenic spirit. We should stress the role of the "renewed baptismal vow" service for the paedo-Baptist seeking believers' baptism - this would give the appropriate opportunity to make clear the faith-response.

We recognise that for most Baptists pastoral factors cannot exclude totally the practice of so-called "second baptism" for, at present, most Baptists would not reject the request of the person whose conscience was sharpened by Biblical imperative and who had perhaps suffered from indiscriminate infant baptism.

This paper began with the question which was asked of churches by the British Council of Churches Belfast Assembly: "To consider how far the two classic patterns of Christian initiation can be seen as acceptable alternatives". This

question does merit the most serious consideration, though we have seen in this background paper there will be no short cuts to an early resolution of the baptismal controversy. The possibility of the two patterns enjoying a rich theological relationship rooted in the breadth of man's experience of God and response to him gives us a new perspective and opens up several possibilities for both sides to work through humbly in the months ahead.

M. J. QUICKE

SUMMER SCHOOL 1982

Plans are being made for a Summer School from Thursday evening, 8th July to Sunday afternoon, 11th July 1982. The School will be held at the West Midland Baptist Association's centre at Malvern. The theme of the school will be "Baptists in the Twentieth Century". Fees are not yet known but will be announced as soon as possible. Meanwhile provisional bookings are invited and should be sent to the Secretary, 4 Southampton Row, London WC1B 4AB. Members who have brief contributions, perhaps in line with the school theme, are invited to submit subjects with their bookings.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

J. Burgess, M.A., M.Litt.

Editor, Wesley Historical Society, Cumbria Branch.

N. Clark, M.A., S.T.M.

Tutor, South Wales Baptist College, Cardiff.

G. G. Nicol, B.D.

Research Student, Regent's Park College, Oxford.

G. F. Nuttall, M.A., D.D.

Formerly Lecturer, New College, London.

M. J. Quicke, M.A.

Minister, St Andrew's Street Baptist Church,
Cambridge.

Reviews: Ian Sellers, Roger Hayden, Paul Rowntree Clifford.