

# **The History of Baptism**

## **Part 1 & Part 2**

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### **Part 1**

#### **The History of Baptism from Paul to Luther**

"Fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong." Some may use this adage seriously, but to others it is a sarcastic way of saying that truth cannot be decided by majority vote—a point driven home by Paul in Romans 3:4, "Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar."

Historically, those associated with the conservative branches of the Restoration Movement have enthusiastically accepted Paul's admonition, being content to hold on to certain theological convictions, even if they perceived themselves to be in the minority. This is no doubt still true for many. However, many among us recently seem to have adopted a very different attitude with respect to baptism: "Fifty million evangelicals can't be wrong."

The thinking is that, if practically the entire evangelical world thinks God bestows saving grace as soon as the sinner believes and repents, then there must be some truth there. If evangelicals agree that baptism is simply the new Christian's obedient expression of or witness to his new status as a member of the body of Christ, then there must be something wrong with the "minority" view that baptism is the point of time when God gives salvation. Surely, 50 million evangelicals can't be wrong!

Yes, they can; and I believe they are. Long ago I decided to accept the Bible alone as my only norm for faith and practice. And long ago I became convinced that everything the New Testament says

about the meaning of baptism can be summed up thus: water baptism is the God-appointed time when he first gives saving grace to the believing, repentant sinner.

Should we then just ignore the standard evangelical approach to baptism? Not at all. We need to understand what evangelicals are saying, and why they are saying it. All our doctrinal convictions, while grounded ultimately upon the Bible alone, should be developed in full view of past and present Christian thinking. A knowledge of the historical development of any doctrine is extremely valuable; it can enrich our understanding as well as help us avoid serious doctrinal errors.

This is especially true of baptism. Too often, our historical perspective on this doctrine is much too limited. We tend to see ourselves within the context of the last 200 years. We know that the early Restorationists rejected the prevailing denominational (e.g., Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist) views of baptism, and came to see baptism as having a key role in the reception of salvation. Now, two centuries later, some are wondering if they went too far. After all, was it not a bit presumptuous of the Campbells, Walter Scott, John Smith, et al., to reject the traditional consensus view of baptism and come up with a new and opposite view? Why should we stick with these innovators, rather than just blend in with the "50 million evangelicals" who are continuing the traditional view?

## **The New View**

What I will say now may surprise some, but the truth is this: the modern evangelical view of baptism is actually the new view, an interpretation of baptism that was invented only in the early 1520s. It was created by the Swiss reformer Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531), developed further by John Calvin, and accepted throughout most of the Protestant world. Until Zwingli, the entire Christian world for the first 1,500 years of its history was in agreement: water baptism is the God-appointed time when he first gives saving grace to sinners. Exceptions to this belief were

extremely rare, limited mostly to medieval dualist sects that rejected all physical forms of worship.

My plea here is that in developing our own convictions concerning baptism today, we will not limit our historical perspective to contemporary evangelicalism, or even to the last 200 years. Rather, let us be aware of the entire scope of Christian history. Let us understand what the original and true consensus view was, and who the real innovators are.

In the rest of this article I will survey the history of the meaning of baptism up to and including Martin Luther—a 1,500-year biblical consensus. In the next article I will explain how Zwingli changed everything.

## **Early Writers**

The pre-Augustinian writers were practically unanimous in their teaching that baptism is the point of time when salvation is given. Justin Martyr (A.D. 110-165) said that new converts "are brought to us where there is water, and are regenerated ... For ... they then receive the washing with water," as in John 3:5. "We have learned from the apostles this reason "for baptism: "in order that we ... may obtain in the water the remission of sins" (First Apology, 61). Tertullian (A.D. 145-220) said, "Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life" (On Baptism, iii). Also, "The act of baptism ... is carnal, in that we are plunged in water, but the effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from sins" (Ibid., vii). Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 315-386) said, "When going down ... into the water, think not of the bare element, but look for salvation in the power of the Holy Ghost" (Catechetical lectures, III:4). Many more examples could be cited.

## **Augustine and Thomas Aquinas**

Augustine (354-430) introduced a lot of new ideas into Christian thinking, but the saving significance of baptism was not one of them. Here he was simply continuing to teach what those before him had taught. Baptism, he said, is nothing else than salvation itself (A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, I:34); it "brings salvation" ((Letter 98, To Boniface, 1)). We are "saved by baptism"; "the salvation of man is effected in baptism" (Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, III:5). We are "joined to Christ by baptism"; indeed, a person "is baptized for the express purpose of being with Christ" (A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, I:55). The "apostolic tradition" teaches the "inherent principle, that without baptism ... it is impossible for any man to attain to salvation and everlasting life." (Ibid., I:34)

Thomas Aquinas represents medieval Catholic thinking. He declared that "no one can obtain salvation but through Christ ... But for this end is baptism conferred on a man, that being regenerated thereby, he may be incorporated in Christ ... Consequently it is manifest that all are bound to be baptized: and that without Baptism there is no salvation for men." (Summa Theologica, 68:1)

## **Martin Luther**

Many have assumed that because Martin Luther opposed the Catholic doctrine of the sacraments and championed the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith, he must have been the one who rejected baptism as a salvation event. Nothing could be further from the truth. Luther's view of the meaning of baptism stands in direct continuity with the New Testament, the early church fathers, and the Catholic scholars who preceded him. He regarded baptism as a mighty work of God in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit pour out the full blessings of salvation upon penitent believers.

Specifically, Luther asserted that forgiveness of sins is initially bestowed in baptism. In his Small Catechism (IV:6), in answer to the question "What gifts or benefits does baptism bestow?", he

says first of all, "It effects forgiveness of sins. This is part of the work of baptism; in it "the forgiveness takes place through God's covenant." (The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism)  
Forgiveness takes place in baptism because that is where the blood of Christ is applied to the sinner: "Through Baptism he is bathed in the blood of Christ and is cleansed from sins." (E.Plass, editor, What Luther Says, I:46)

According to Luther baptism brings not only forgiveness of sins but also a new birth, a change in the inner man that actually eradicates sin. For "it is one thing to forgive sins, and another thing to put them away or drive them out ... But both the forgiveness and the driving out of sins are the work of baptism." (The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism, 15). Thus it is appropriate to speak of baptism as the time when "a person is born again and made new." (Ibid., 3)

In short, Luther clearly proclaimed that baptism is for salvation: "Through baptism man is saved." (Ibid.,6) In answer to the question of the purpose of baptism, i.e., "what benefits, gifts and effects it brings," he gave this answer: "To put it most simply ,the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save." (The Large Catechism, IV:23,24) One is baptized so that he "may receive in the water the promised salvation." (Ibid., IV:36)

I refer to the view of baptism described here as the "biblical consensus." It is the view that baptism is principally the time when God himself is bestowing upon the penitent, believing sinner the benefits of the redeeming work of Christ. This is the New Testament's own doctrine of baptism, and it was affirmed to be such by 15 centuries of Christian writers.

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**Foot Notes:**

1 All the quotations given here—and more—can be found and documented in chapters 1 and 2 of *Baptism and the Remission of Sins*, edited by David Fletcher (Joplin: College Press, 1990).

## **The History of Baptism Part 2**

For Christendom's first 1,500 years there was a virtual consensus that baptism is the point of time when God bestows the "double cure" of saving grace (forgiveness and regeneration) upon sinners. (See last week's article.) Why, then, do most Protestants hold a different view, one that passionately separates salvation from baptism? The answer lies in the revolutionary theology of one man, Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531).

Zwingli was Martin Luther's Swiss counterpart in the European Reformation. Both began their reforming activity around 1520. Though they had the same general goals for changing the existing church, they parted company over the "sacraments" in general and over baptism in particular. While Luther continued to teach the historic view that baptism is a saving work of God, Zwingli rejected this altogether and made it entirely a work of man. Zwingli was quite aware of the innovative nature of his view, declaring that "in this matter of baptism, all the [teachers] have been in error from the time of the apostles" (40).

### **The Rejection of the Original view**

Zwingli developed his new doctrine of baptism in two stages. First, beginning as early as 1523, he deliberately and decisively rejected any connection between baptism and salvation. "Christ himself did not connect salvation with baptism," he said. "The two are not to be connected and used together." "Water-baptism cannot contribute in any way to the washing away of sin" (41). He denied that the water itself has any power to remove the effects of sin from the soul [a view which few had ever held in the first

place]; he also denied that God cleanses the soul during baptism, an idea he calls a "vain invention." The general rule is that salvation precedes the baptism that symbolizes it (41,42).

What were Zwingli's reasons for separating salvation from the act of baptism? The main reason was his conviction that the baptism-for-salvation view contradicts salvation by grace alone through the blood of Christ. Washing away the filth of sin "is the function of the blood of Christ alone" (43). Another reason baptism cannot be for salvation, he said, is that such a view would violate God's sovereignty, i.e., his sovereign freedom to act when and where he chooses (44). Closely connected with this is his idea that the real cause of any individual's salvation is God's sovereign, eternal, unconditional election (predestination) of that person. It is election that saves, not baptism, and not even faith (45).

In my judgment one of Zwingli's strongest reasons for rejecting the historic view of baptism was his incipient philosophical dualism, i.e., his sense of a strong antithesis between matter and spirit, between body and soul. He saw spirit and matter as openly hostile to each other. "Divinity, spirit, the superior nature" stands in direct opposition to dull, dark, inactive, rebellious earth (65). This carries over into the dual nature of man. While the soul can be regarded as "flowing forth from the Godhead itself" and as possessing a nearly divine essence, the body is just a "dull mass," a "lump of muddy earth" (65, 66). How, then, can water baptism have anything to do with the salvation of the soul? A physical substance (water) simply cannot have any connection with a spiritual effect: "Material water cannot contribute in any way to the cleansing of the soul" (43).

The conclusion is that baptism is not necessary for salvation, neither as its cause nor as its occasion. Zwingli clearly affirms that faith alone is necessary for salvation: "Christ himself did not connect salvation with baptism: it is always by faith alone." "The one necessary thing which saves those of us who hear the Gospel is faith." "Faith is the only thing through which we are blessed."

"We are saved by faith only." If we say baptism takes away sins, that is just a figure of speech; for it is not baptism that takes them away, but faith (45).

What does Zwingli do with all the New Testament texts that seem to clearly connect baptism with salvation? He dismisses them entirely by two devices. One, many are mere figures of speech, such as metonymy, in which the name of the sign is transferred to the thing signified. He applies this to texts such as Ephesians 5:26; Romans 6:3,4; Galatians 3:27; and Titus 3:5. Two, some texts refer to water baptism, but others refer to Holy Spirit baptism, which is sovereignly administered by God whenever he chooses. Only the later is necessary for salvation (46,47).

The second stage of the development of Zwingli's new doctrine of baptism was his careful construction of a completely new purpose or meaning for the act. This was accomplished mainly between 1523 and 1525. In this period his most pressing need was to provide a rationale for infant baptism. Since the third century, infants had been baptized for the removal of original sin. But if baptism has no connection with the taking away of sin, there is no longer any reason to baptize infants. But for certain reasons Zwingli decided that infant baptism must be maintained; thus he had to come up with a new purpose for it.

## **Creating Covenant Theology**

The results of Zwingli's quest were truly revolutionary. In order to justify anew infant baptism, he laid the foundation for a whole new hermeneutical approach to the Bible, usually known as covenant theology. In summary, he rejected the traditional distinction between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, and introduced that ever since (at least) Abraham there has been just one covenant of grace. What we call the "new" covenant is actually the same covenant God made with Abraham. The Mosaic covenant was merely a secondary, temporary expedient; when it was set aside the Abrahamic covenant continued on and still



continues on today. The church today is under the covenant God made with Abraham. This is the concept of covenant unity (50,51).

If there has been just one covenant since the days of Abraham, then there has also been just one covenant people since that time. The Israelites of old and the Christians of today are all part of the same body, the same church (51).

Most significantly, if there is just one covenant and one covenant people, then there is also just one covenant sign. Based on this reasoning, Zwingli totally equated the meaning of baptism in the New Testament with the meaning of Old Testament circumcision' each is simply a sign of membership in the one covenant people (51, 52).

Here, then, is Zwingli's trilogy: one covenant, one covenant people, and one covenant sign. This new set of ideas is the basis for the usual Protestant doctrine of baptism. It is the reason many Protestant churches "baptize" infants, and it is the foundation of the commonly accepted Protestant faith-only approach to the baptism of adults.

## **Baptism Reexamined**

According to this Zwinglian view, exactly what is the function of baptism in the experience of a Christian convert? Exactly what is happening during the moment of baptism? Two things. First, baptism is the baptized person's pledge of allegiance to the Christian community, an outward sign of his inward commitment to live the Christian life. Zwingli actually drew this aspect of baptism's meaning not from Old Testament circumcision but from the meaning of the Latin word sacramentum, meaning "a pledge, an oath." Herein arose the whole idea of baptism as a public testimony or witness. Everything baptism signifies has already happened; baptism is the means by which one makes it known to

other Christians. It is thus done not for the sake of the one baptized, but for those in the audience (57-59).

Second, baptism is the baptized person's sign of belonging to the covenant people. Thus it performs the exact same function as circumcision in the Old Testament era. This assumed Old Testament connection is the reason baptism is called a "covenant sign" or "the sign of the covenant." (These terms make sense only on Zwinglian presuppositions.) Just as circumcision signified that one was already a member of the covenant people (by birth), so does baptism signify that one has already been saved and is already a member of the church (60,61).

This view was taken over by John Calvin, and most Protestants have adopted it in one form or another.

## **The Big Picture**

In conclusion, regarding the meaning of baptism, the contrast between the first 1,500 years of Christian history and the history of Protestantism since Zwingli could not be more severe. In its original form baptism was clearly seen as a work of God, as the time when God himself was bestowing salvation. But since Zwingli, baptism has been seen almost exclusively as a work of man; in baptism one gives testimony, bears witness to his faith, expresses his faith, commits or pledges himself to live as a Christian, lets the world know he is a Christian. These are all acts of me, not acts of God.

What is most significant is that Zwingli formulated his new doctrine of baptism by ignoring the New Testament's own teaching and by drawing his new view from two non-New Testament sources: the meaning of Latin word (*sacramentum*) and the meaning of Old Testament circumcision. I challenge anyone to find anywhere in the New Testament itself any justification whatsoever for this new Zwinglian view. I cannot understand why so many of our preachers and people want to abandon the original

view of baptism and align themselves with the innovator Zwingli and his modern followers. "Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar" (Romans 3:4, New American Standard Bible).

**End Notes:**

1 All page numbers in this article are references to my essay, "Baptism According to the Reformed Tradition," in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective*, edited by David Fletcher (Joplin: College Press, 1990), 39-81. There one may find all the original documentation and bibliographical information for quotations from Zwingli's writings.

2 See my book, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (Joplin: College Press, 1989), 153-163, for a refutation of the idea that *eperotema* in 1 Peter 3:21 means "pledge," contra to the New International Version.