BAPTISTS AND BAPTISM: A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY DILEMMA

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In 1645, Anglican cleric Daniel Featley published one of the first critiques levelled against "the Dippers," a relatively new British sect that would soon become known as Baptists. Among multiple criticisms, Featley declared:

> They preach, and print, and practice their Heretical impieties openly; they hold their Conventicles weekly in our chief Cities, and Suburbs thereof, and there prophesie by turns; and (that I may use the phrase of Tertullian) *aedificantur in ruinam*, they build one another in the faith of their Sect, to the ruin of their souls; they flock in great multitudes to their Jordans, and both Sexes enter into the River, and are dipt after their manner with a kind of spell containing the heads of their erroneous tenets, and their engaging themselves in their schismatical Covenants, and (if I may so speak) combination of separation. And as they defile our Rivers with their impure washings, and our Pulpits with their false prophecies and fanatical enthusiasms, so the presses sweat and groan under the load of their blasphemies.[6]

Featley debated several Baptists in a gathering in Southwark, England, in the mid-1640s, and published their exchanges in the 1645 book entitled *The Dippers Dipt or, the Anabaptists Duck'd and Plung'd over Head and Ears, at a Disputation in Southwark*. As he saw it, the "Dippers" or "Anabaptists" were little more than a rabble of sectarian anarchists who with little or no theological training or knowledge had set themselves and their off-brand dogmas against the learned, orthodox representatives of the Anglican Christian establishment. Their doctrinal claims, he said, were patently heretical, utilized primarily to mask the sexual immorality evident in their practice of public immersion of both men and women whose water-soaked garments revealed their private body parts. Featley concluded that prurient public displays were merely one element of the Anabaptists' lustful activities, undergirded by their destructive theological attitudes. Indeed, Featley insisted that,

> [A]ll the sacraments of the Church may and ought to be administered without giving any just scandal. But the resort of great multitudes of men and women together in the evening, and going naked into Rivers, there to be plunged and Dipt, cannot be done without scandal, especially where the State giveth no allowance to any such practice, nor appointeth any order to prevent such foul abuses as are

[6] Daniel Featley, *The Dippers Dipt or, the Anabaptists Duck'd and Plung'd over head and Ears, at a Disputation in Southwark* (London: Printed for N.B and Richard Royston, 1645), A4-5.

like at such disorderly meetings to be committed. *Ergo,* The Sacrament of Baptism ought not to be administered with such plunging or *Dipping.*[7]

Featley acknowledged that Anglicans generally agreed, "Dipping may be used at Baptism," and that "the Church of England both alloweth it and practiseth it; yet it is in no way necessary, or essential to Baptism."[8] For Daniel Featley and other Anglican leaders, adult baptism by immersion, at least in a public setting, was a scandalous act, to be opposed by both church and state for its lasciviousness.

Pushing back, the early Baptists asserted that Christian baptism began at the river, an act accepted by and administered to the Son of God. John the Baptizer came storming out of the wilderness demanding river baptism as a sign of true repentance. Then comes Jesus to the river, seeking baptism. John hesitates, but Jesus insists, and into, under, muddy Jordan he goes, taking all God's people with him.

For early Baptists, Jesus' immersion by John in the river Jordan was both the model and method to be followed by those who claimed faith in him. In fact, historian William Brackney identifies immersion baptism as that most unifying distinctive of the people called Baptists. He concludes that more than any other characteristic of the Baptist tradition, believers' baptism by immersion was the essence of historic Baptist identity.[9] Baptism is thus an event and a theology which unites Baptists to each other, as well as to Christ and his Church.

Seventeenth century Baptists challenged the prevailing infant baptism of Roman Catholic and Reformation churches by rejecting 'pedo-baptism' as an inappropriate practice outside the proper biblical theology and mode. Their commitment to the theology of a believers' church required a confession of faith in Christ by individuals, essentially adults, who were capable of moral discernment and personal repentance.[10] Baptism was understood as an outward sign of one's experience of God's saving grace through faith in Christ. The 1611 confession of faith written by the founding Baptist communion in Amsterdam declared: "That the church of Christ is a company of faithful people separated from the world by the word & spirit of God, being knit unto the Lord, & one another, by Baptism upon their own confession of the faith and sins."[11] Baptists began and continue as a believers' church, grounded in the need for all persons who claim membership in the church to affirm an experience of grace through Christ, receiving baptism on the basis of that confession.

That initial Baptist congregation was formed in 1609 by a group of British Separatists in exile in Amsterdam. Their leaders, John Smyth and Thomas Helwys, were Separatists who came to believe that the

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[7] Ibid, 39. See also Bill J. Leonard, "Sex, Class, and Religious Freedom: Daniel Featley vs. the Early Baptists," *Baptist History and Heritage,* (Spring 2018): 26–42.
[8] Ibid, 36–37.
[9] William H. Brackney, "'Commonly, (Though Falsely) Called. . .': Reflections on the Search for Baptist Identity" in *Perspectives in Churchmanship*, edited by David M. Scholer, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 79–80.
[10] The earliest Baptists were generally church-related individuals, baptized as infants in Anglican churches, who repudiated that ritual as no real baptism, and received believer's baptism by affusion (pouring) or, by the 1640s, Immersion. Generally, they administered baptism to adolescents and adults, not to children. Particular (Calvinist) Baptists acknowledged that elect children could be converted whenever God chose to awaken their souls to the need for grace.
[11] William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* Second Edition (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2011), 111.

Church of England was not a true church. They led their little Amsterdam community in renouncing their Anglican baptism and, confessing their faith in Christ, to receive baptism by trine affusion, pouring water three times on the head in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. British historian A. C. Underwood described the event: "Pastor and deacons laid down their office, the church disbanded or avowed itself no church, and all stood as private individuals, unbaptized. All being equal, Smyth proposed that Helwys their social leader baptize them, but he deferred to his spiritual leader."[12] Smyth baptized himself, then baptized Helwys and the others.

By the 1640s, a group of British Particular Baptists had discovered immersion as practised by the Collegiant Mennonites in the Netherlands, concluding that baptism "ought to be by diping ye Body into ye Water, resembling Burial & rising again."[13] The First London Confession of Particular Baptists (1644) is even more specific in its description of baptism as "an Ordinance of the new Testament, given by Christ to be dispensed only upon persons professing faith, or that are Disciples, or taught, who upon profession of faith, or that are Disciples, or taught, who upon profession of faith, ought to be baptized." The confession continues that,

> The way and manner of the dispensing of this Ordinance the Scripture holds out to be dipping or plunging the whole body under water, it being a sign, but answer the thing signified, which are these: first, the washing the whole soul in the blood of Christ. Secondly, that interest the Saints have in the death, burial, and resurrection; thirdly together with a confirmation of our faith, that as certainly as the body is buried under water, and riseth again, so certainly shall the bodies of the Saints be raised by the power of Christ, in the day of resurrection to reign with Christ.[14]

Baptism by immersion became an identifying characteristic of Baptists from that day to this, a practice not without controversy inside and outside the Baptist family. In colonial America, Baptist gatherings at rivers and creeks sometimes produced mob violence from establishmentarian Puritans who opposed the founding of Baptist churches in their towns. William McLoughlin wrote of those occasions: "To avoid trouble, Baptists usually tried to hold their baptismal ceremonies in out-of-the-way places. But sometimes they made a big show of it. In either case, they invited violent reactions from both the respectable and disreputable members of the community."[15]

Nineteenth century Baptists in the United States turned on each other in serious debates over the meaning of baptism, its proper administration, and its implications for church membership. Old Landmarkism, so called, traced Baptist origins through a 'trail of blood' that included other sectarian groups from the early days of Christianity including Donatists, Novatians, Waldensians, Anabaptists, and other dissenters deemed heretical by certain European religious establishments. Landmarkism also erroneously

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[12] Alfred C. Underwood, *A History of English Baptists* (London: Baptist Union Publishing Department, 1947), 37–38. See also Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Ways: A History* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2003), 23–26.
[13] Leonard, *Baptist Ways,* 29.
[14] William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard, *Baptist Confessions of Faith,* 155.
[15] William G. McLoughlin, *Soul Liberty: The Baptists' Struggle in New England, 1630-1833* (Hanover, NH: Brown University Press, 1991), 197.

posited that these groups were 'Baptist in everything but name,' thus seeking to prove that Baptists were the 'only true church,' from the beginning of the faith. This allowed them not only to repudiate infant baptism, but also to denounce as invalid 'alien immersion,' an immersion administered by non-Baptist, non-Landmark ministers. Rebaptism was thus required of all who had not received immersion in Landmark congregations, even if they had been previously immersed.[16]

By the twentieth century, Baptists were also divided over the question of admitting to church membership those who could testify to an experience of God's grace, having received baptism as infants, or non-immersion baptism in adulthood. That issue remains divisive with some congregations requiring immersion of all persons who receive membership in their specific church. Membership is granted only to the immersed. Other congregations promote what is sometimes called 'open baptism,' receiving as members those who testify to faith, and accepting their infant or non-immersion baptism as valid for membership in a Baptist church. These divisions have often been extended as more people from other denominations seek or consider membership in Baptist congregations.

The twentieth century also gave rise to a phenomenon involving the rebaptism of persons who had received previous baptism in Baptist churches, a practice particularly evident in Baptist churches in the American South. One reason for those multiple immersions may have involved the practice of baptizing young children, sometimes as early as ages 5 or 6. As these children grew to adolescence and adulthood, many became concerned that their earlier baptism was not a valid conversion because they 'did not understand,' 'were pressured' into being baptized, or were 'not really saved.' At the same time, certain churches and pastors emphasized the need for the 'conversion of church members' who had received baptism earlier, but whose conversions were called into question.

In a classic work entitled *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice,* American Baptist historians Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson responded to rebaptism practices, noting:

> Such rebaptism is of dubious validity and ought to be discouraged. It is normal for adults to grow to deeper levels of Christian understanding and assurance, and their earlier experience may then seem vague and deficient in meaning. It would be a mistake, however, to allow every experience of spiritual renewal to become an occasion to ask for a rebaptism. ... This problem of rebaptizing church members already baptized upon a profession of their faith underscores the advisability of administering baptism only to persons who have reached an age at which they can make a responsible decision to commit their life to the lordship of Jesus Christ.[17]

In the twenty-first century, Baptists, like other American religious communities, are living in a time of permanent transition in their institutional and ecclesiastical life that impacts Christian groups across the theological spectrum. Indeed, in the United States, many congregations confront aging constituents,

[16] Leonard, *Baptist Ways,* 183-184.
[17] Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice,* Revised Edition (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1991). See also Bill J. Leonard, *God's Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 90.

declining finances, and a society in which one in five Americans claim no religious affiliation whatsoever. Some speak of a post-denominational, even post-Christian culture, with new challenges and opportunities the order of the day. Others observe that traditional ways of calling people to conversion, particularly through revivals and other evangelistic traditions are increasingly less viable than in the past. Fewer conversions mean fewer baptisms and dwindling church attendance. If Baptists once took beliefs about baptism for granted, they can do so no longer, and understand that even some of the most active church members may not be clear on what baptism means and why it is an important spiritual experience.[18]

The question, 'Does baptism save you?', once so important to American Protestants competing seems less relevant as the church moves across the twenty-first century. A more appropriate question is, 'Does Baptism mean anything at all?' For many modern's inside and outside the church, baptism is neither powerful nor significant, but something of an anachronistic initiation ritual of a bygone era. To others, baptism is an antiseptic event, tacked on to worship, streamlined for the sake of convenience. Most churches do not gather at the river anymore. We have taken it inside and toned it down considerably. Some Christian traditions use minimal amounts of water. Baptists dip the entire body, often into heated, fiberglass baptisteries full of fresh water, 'no muss, no fuss.' In many churches, after the baptismal service, you can hear the strains of distant hair dryers making new converts presentable before their return to the worshiping congregation. Perhaps we would do better to welcome them into the congregation, dripping a little baptismal water on the carpet and on the rest of us!

In one sense, baptism remains a central event in Baptist identity and practice, administered with joy and celebration as an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Yet in another sense, across the theological spectrum almost every Baptist group in the United States is experiencing a decline in the number of annual baptisms. For example, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), America's largest Protestant denomination, has experienced over a decade of decline in baptisms and church membership. Denominational statistics from 2012 suggest that the only age group showing an SBC baptismal increase was the five-year-old's and that as many as 80 percent of SBC churches baptized only one or no one between the ages of eighteen and thirty—dire statistics for the twice-born future.[19] In their annual report of 2017, SBC churches reported baptizing 254,122 people, some 26.5 percent fewer baptisms than in 2007. That recent ratio was one baptism for every 59 church members.[20] The American Baptist Churches, another of the country's oldest Baptist denominations, reports a significant decline in the number of baptisms, evident in a forty-one percent drop in the last five years.[21]

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[18] Bill J. Leonard, "Dull Habit or Acute Fever? William James and the Protestant Conversion Crisis," *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin* (Summer/Autumn 2015): 48–58.

[19] Kate Tracy, "Five Reasons Why Most Southern Baptist Churches Baptized Almost No Millennials," *Christianity Today,* May 29, 2014, www.christianitytoday.com/gleanings/2014/may.

[20] Lisa Cannon Green, "ACP: Worship Attendance Rises, Baptisms Decline," *Baptist Press,* June 1, 2018.

[21] Chelsen Vicari, "Where Does the American Baptist Churches USA Stand on Sex, Abortion, and Decline?" *Juicy Ecumenism,* June 14, 2018, https://juicyecumenism.com/2018/06/14/american-baptist-churches-usa-stand-sex-abortion-decline/. Other Baptist groups are less clear on their baptismal statistics; however, they are no doubt part of the decline evident among the broader Evangelical traditions in the U.S. as evident in the contention that Evangelicals 'peaked' in number in the 1990s at some 29% and in 2017 were listed at 17% of the population.

Closely related to the decline of baptisms among Baptists in the United States is the rise of a broad group of religiously unaffiliated individuals often referred to as the "nones," persons identified in various surveys as those who have distanced themselves from religious institutions. For many years such studies showed that the "nones" or the "unaffiliated" were consistently numbered at around seven percent of the American population. Likewise, succeeding surveys reflect unrelenting increase of "nones," or "nons," individuals who self-identify as having no significant engagement with traditional religious communities. Recent studies indicate that the number religiously unaffiliated Americans increase annually, currently the largest single religious identification at 25% as contrast with white evangelicals at some 21%.[22] Thus one in five Americans claims no engagement with a religious community. That number increases to one in three for millennials, ages 18 to 30. Those demographic and religion-related developments create major identity issues for American churches and denominations. Baptismal, membership, financial, and institutional declines in the Southern Baptist Convention are a dramatic case in point.[23]

In such moments of uncertainty and transition, how are Baptists to respond? Perhaps, like Christians before us in similar circumstances, we return to those things which have been there from the beginning of the church: faith in Jesus Christ and baptism into Christ's body, the Church. When the old mechanisms and institutions will not hold, and new ones are a long time coming, we go back where we belong. . . to the river. At the river, at baptism, we remember our past to respond to our future.

Four hundred years after those exiled Baptists began their new movement in Amsterdam, Baptists might reassert that Christian baptism is a radical event. It is not merely a command we fulfil, or a membership requirement we must endure to get into the church. It is an act we experience which transforms the experience itself. Baptism does not create salvation, it accompanies it. Baptism is not merely a symbol; rather it is a symbol, which means baptism is an act of faith, and a celebration of God's grace.

Yet however we administer it, baptism should be a significant moment for participant and observer alike. And every time we do it, we should say again something of what baptism means to the people of God. We might remember, for example, that to be baptized is to put on Christ. As Paul writes, "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Gal. 3:27). We not only believe in Jesus, but also identify with him and his way of living in the world.

In the early Christian centuries, converts were baptized naked. Now that would perk up a Sunday morning worship service! And they put on white robes when they came up out of the water. It was a sign

[22] Betsy Cooper, Daniel Cox, Rachel Lienesch, Robert P. Jones, "Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion—and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back," September 22, 2016, PRRI. http://www.prri.org/research/prri-rns-poll-nones-atheist-leaving-religion/.

[23] While the number of SBC-related congregations increased, reported membership declined more than 200,000, down 1.32 percent to 15.3 million members. Average weekly worship attendance declined by 1.72 percent to 5.6 million worshippers. Southern Baptists also experienced a decline in baptisms, down 3.3 percent to 295,212. The number of churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention grew by 294 to 46,793, a 0.63 percent increase over 2014. This is the 17th year in a row the number of SBC churches has grown. https://www.getreligion.org/getreligion/2016/6/8/news-in-those-southern-baptist-statistics-baptisms-babies-and-crucial-ethnic-churches.

that they had literally put on Christ like a new garment. We, like they, are the Christ-bearers of our world, carrying Christ with us out there where we belong.

We might also say that baptism is not merely a symbol of faith—it is an act of faith. Perhaps we might call it a faithful act. Faith and baptism are linked inseparably. All Christian communions affirm that unity. Faith keeps baptism from becoming a purely magic ritual while baptism keeps faith from deteriorating into a purely individualistic experience.

Most of all, perhaps, baptism is the symbol of liberation in Christ. It is the promise of freedom to all who believe. Nowhere is this more evident than in the time of slavery in the American South. White Christians frequently qualified the gospel by insisting that baptism changed only the slave's eternal status, not their earthly condition. But try as they might, they could not keep the liberating power of the gospel from finding its way into the hearts and hopes of the African-Americans. Thus, in 1804, a Kentucky slave woman named Winnie was disciplined by the Forks of Elkhorn Baptist Church where she was a member for saying that "she once thought it her duty to serve her mistress and master, but since the Lord had converted her [since her baptism] she had never believed that any Christian [could keep] Negroes or slaves." And she got into more trouble for saying that "there were thousands of white people wallowing in hell for their treatment to Negroes—and she did not care if there was many more."[24] That woman talked free, didn't she, even in slavery?

If we want to keep people in bondage, we should never tell them the story of Jesus, or baptize them into the radical faith of the gospel. To be baptized, therefore is to enter the river, the 'glad river,' through which all the saints have trod. It is to belong to a people. Those who are baptized into Christ are stuck with each other, Paul says, though he says it a little more eloquently than that. "For Christ is like a single body, with its many limbs and organs which, many as they are, together make up one body. For indeed, we were all brought into one body by baptism in the one Spirit. Whether we are Jews or Greeks, whether slave or free, and that one Holy Spirit was poured out for all of us to drink" (I Cor. 12: 12-13). We are a people of liberation, not bondage, captivated by a gospel which is often too radical for us.

This liberating gospel compels us to go out into the world, confronting issues of race and gender, worship and spirituality, witness and mission, sin and salvation—scary stuff. Let us remember that the word Baptist itself is merely an adjective. Baptism unites us with all Christians across the world and extends our calling to persons inside and outside the church. We are the community of the baptized, and it is in community that we continually return to the river, discovering again and again the meaning of this act of faith.

Our daughter, Stephanie, is a person with special needs, with learning and motor skill disabilities. Concepts do not come easily for her. Because of that I supposed that she might never receive baptism since she cannot meet all the conceptual pre-requisites demanded by most Baptists. You see, she does not understand the substitutionary theory of the atonement the way the rest of us do. She will never fathom the

[24] William Warren Sweet, ed., *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783–1830* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964), 329.

historical critical method of biblical study or the plenary verbal theory of biblical inspiration. But on the third Sunday in December 1991, on the way home from church, Stephanie, age 16, announced to her mother and me, "I think it's time for me to be baptized." We talked about it and she was resolved, so we went to see our pastor, and he was everything a pastor should be for such a moment. He did not speak of what she had to *know*, but what she wished to *be*. "If you receive baptism, Stephanie," he said, "you are saying that you want to be a follower of Jesus." Do you want that? She said yes, and we prayed together.

And on Christmas Eve in the year of our Lord, 1991, Stephanie Leonard entered the baptistery of the Crescent Hill Baptist Church, Louisville. "Profess your faith, the pastor said. "Jesus is Lord," Stephanie replied. And under she went in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in the presence of a congregation which had nurtured her to faith all her 16 years.

Those events taught me this: we are all special needs persons. In some of us it is just a bit more public than in others. If pressed, I must admit that I know more about sin and salvation, history and theology, doctrine and dogma, than my daughter ever will. But I am not certain that such knowledge makes me any closer to grace than she was on that Christmas Eve.

British Baptist theologian Paul Fiddes offers a renewed emphasis on the importance of baptism in Baptist life and tradition, writing "that many Baptists have failed to give due place to the grace of God received at *baptism*." Rather, they emphasized "the faith of the person coming for baptism, and for the act to be a 'sign' of dying and rising with Christ only in the sense of a *visual aid* or illustration." Thus, baptism was "reduced to an act of obedience and witness alone." Instead, Fiddes proposes another "long Baptist tradition" that links the grace of God with the experience of baptism itself.[25] Instead, he suggests that,

> There is room for the saving grace of God in conversion *and* in believers' baptism if conversion is but one moment in a larger process, in a long story of the saving grace of God that begins with the prevenient work of the Spirit deep in the mysteries of the human heart and ends with the glorifying of the person in the new creation. This is, after all, the New Testament understanding of salvation which is past, present and future. We have arrived once more at the idea of Christian initiation as a journey, but this time from the starting point of the sovereignty of grace, as a power that enables all human response.[26]

We are always going back there, to the river, aren't we? Rediscovering the implications and complications of divine grace. For the years ahead, we need great patience with each other, and great humility in the face of the challenges ahead. By faith, we can know that we count, after all, at the river. And for now, that will have to be good news enough, until that day when all God's people shall gather at the river, that flows by the throne of God.

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[25] Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003), 239.
[26] Ibid, 240.