

PLAYING OUR PART: A WHO'S-WHO OF BAPTISM AND FORMATION

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Introduction

Michael O'Neil raises the vital issue of the relationship between baptism and spiritual formation for the sake of "the renewal of the church".² In doing so, he revisits Alan Kreider's exploration of the ways in which the post-Apostolic church instituted the processes associated with the catechumenate. These occurred over a prolonged period during which new believers were instructed in the faith and encouraged in a Christian habitus, a deeply formed way of life, in preparation for their baptism.³ The expectation was, therefore, that new converts would undergo a significant degree of formation prior to their baptism.

In valuing this connection between baptism and formation, O'Neil is not arguing for a reappropriation of such practices. In fact, he suggests, that this may be an impossible or even undesirable goal.⁴ Specifically, we might conclude, such a move would constitute a denial of New Testament teaching concerning the close temporal association between conversion and baptism, and the historical Baptist affirmation of this. We can, nevertheless, with O'Neil, laud this early commitment to recognise the inextricable links between baptism and formation. We may argue concerning their order but not their necessary and profound interconnectedness.

Such was certainly the commitment of the early Baptists for whom baptism was understood as the initiatory rite of new believers into the visible, gathered church who, together, would seek to fulfil the covenant undertakings given in baptism.⁵ The primary purpose of each church community was to walk together and watch over one another in order to honour Christ, their prophet, priest and king, as those being formed in his likeness. The first fruits of such formation, such as professions of repentance and faith and commitment to obedience, were expected to be apparent in those who testified to their rebirth and sought baptism and its associated church membership.⁶ But, as I will explore further below, in this context, the thought that the baptisand's ongoing formation would not be pursued thereafter with all seriousness by both the baptisand and their church community, was unthinkable.

¹ Malyon College is an affiliate institution of the Australian College of Theology.

² See, Michael D. O'Neil, "For As Many of You as Were Baptised into Christ have Clothed Yourselves with Christ": Baptism, Baptists, and the Renewal of the Church" *Pacific Journal of Theological Research* 14, no. 1 (May 2019): 21-22.

³ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 134.

⁴ O'Neil, "For as Many," 22.

⁵ This focus on the early Baptists, as I have argued elsewhere, acts as a corrective to the post-Enlightenment influences which have resulted in the distortion and attenuation of many important aspects of church life. Anne Klose, *Covenantal Priesthood: A Narrative of Community for Baptist Churches* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2018), 8.

⁶ William L. Lumpkin, ed., "The Second London Confession of Faith (1677)," in *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969), 291.

My purpose in this paper is to outline who plays what parts in baptism and formation, and how and why do they do this. In doing so I will explore *baptism* as the foundation of and template for *spiritual formation* through the lens of its *various participants* within the context of *covenant*.

In this brief work I will make a number of assumptions regarding each of the four terms highlighted in this. In relation to baptism, I will be referring to this in its New Testament context which holds believer baptism together with a whole constellation of divine-human encounters which occur at the outset of the Christian life and represent the “impressive array of blessings attached to baptism.”⁷ This does not imply that, for example, baptism produces regeneration but rather that, in New Testament terms, they cannot be regarded as unrelated: it is impossible to imagine either without the other. It is therefore appropriate to hold them together as closely as possible in our considerations.

Spiritual formation (or simply, formation) is that life-long process of growing in Christlikeness which is largely synonymous with such terms as sanctification and discipleship.⁸ It involves every aspect of life and, again, has both divine and human elements.

Regarding the participants in baptism and the part they each play, I take my lead from James McClendon for whom baptism “is a triply enacted sign, a deed in which *God* and *candidate* and (through its designated minister) *church* all act to effect a turn in one life-story (the candidate’s) on the basis of Jesus’ crucified and risen life.”⁹ The role of each of these participants will be explored with regard to both baptism itself and the call to formation which is inherent in it.

And finally, I use the term covenant, also in its scriptural context, as designating the fundamental form of God’s relating with humanity. In this context I take baptism to be the sign of entry into the new covenant, inaugurated by Christ.¹⁰

I hope to demonstrate that these concepts, understood and practised in relation to one another, will indeed, contribute to “the renewal of the church.”

THE PARTICIPANTS IN BAPTISM: WHO IS DOING WHAT AND WHY?

The focus of believer baptism in many Baptist churches tends to fall heavily on the part played by the candidate for baptism. It is this individual who has believed in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour, who comes in obedience to Christ’s command, and who is now making a public declaration of their faith. As I

⁷ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries*, vol. Kindle (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 199. See further discussion below under “God.”

⁸ See for example, Steven L. Porter, “Sanctification in a New Key: Relieving Evangelical Anxieties over Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care* 1, no. 2 (September 2008): 129–148.

⁹ James Wm. McClendon, *Doctrine*, Systematic Theology Vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 390, emphasis in original.

¹⁰ The connection is implicit throughout the New Testament but clearest in Col 2:8-15, as long as it is remembered that the parallel Paul draws is between baptism and *spiritual* circumcision. For early Baptist recognition of this see “The Church” below.

explore below, the role played by the baptisand is indeed of great significance, but only as it takes its place within the wider story of God's redemptive work in initiating and sustaining covenant with his people.

God

God's preeminent role in baptism may be understood in a number of ways which represent, not discrete options, but points along a continuum. At the very least, God may be understood to be active in baptism in his entirely gracious calling of the new believer into new covenant faith and life. It is God who, in Christ and by his Spirit, has provided everything necessary to bring the baptisand to the point of baptism. As George Beasley-Murray has so comprehensively outlined, the New Testament indicates that these baptismally related blessings include:

forgiveness of sin, Acts 2:38 and cleansing from sins, Acts 22:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; union with Christ, Gal. 3:27, and particularly union with Him in his death and resurrection, Rom. 6:3ff; Col. 2:11f, with all that implies of release from sin's power, as well as guilt, and the sharing of the risen life of the Redeemer, Rom. 6:1-11; participation in Christ's sonship, Gal. 3:26f; consecration to God, 1 Cor. 6:11, hence membership in the Church, the Body of Christ, 1 Cor. 12:13; Gal. 3:27-29; possession of the Spirit, Acts 2:38; 1 Cor. 6:11; 12:13, and therefore the new life in the Spirit, i.e. regeneration, Tit. 3:5; Jn. 3:5; grace to live according to the will of God, Rom. 6:1ff; Col. 3:1ff; deliverance from the evil powers that rule this world, Col. 1:13; the inheritance of the Kingdom of God, Jn. 3:5, and the pledge of the resurrection of the body, Eph. 1:13f; 4:30.¹¹

All in all, it is God who has been at work in new believers: it is not that they are including God in their story but rather that God has graciously received them into the wide sweep of his own, and that in baptism they are coming to understand their place in it.

These actions on God's part should, in relation to believer baptism, normally lie in the relatively recent *past* and provide a significant focus for the practice of baptism. In the *present*, in baptism itself, it might be considered that, at the very least, God is present and active by his Spirit in the same way that he is widely expected to be present and active in other communal and devotional activities such as prayer and singing. We do not seem to feel the need to caution those who faithfully expect God's presence with them during such activities that there is 'nothing magical' happening, but it appears to be said with some regularity concerning both baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is certainly a pre-emptive strike against any belief in the automatic bestowal of grace which is inherent in some forms of sacramentalism, but seems to rule out any sense of expectancy concerning God's presence and activity in baptism.¹² And finally along the continuum, there are, as we are now becoming aware, specifically Baptist forms of sacramentalism which

¹¹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1962), 263–64.

¹² The Baptist rejection of any hint of sacerdotalism and the 'sacramentarianism' that went with it became particularly vehement in the wake of the nineteenth century rise of Tractarianism. David W. Bebbington, *Baptists Through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 188

permit the fullest account of God's role in baptism.¹³ Whichever form of God's agency we choose to acknowledge, there is much to be gained as we seek to engage the faithful imagination of both baptisand and church community concerning baptism. To echo George Beasley-Murray, "It behoves us accordingly to make much of baptism. It is given as the trysting place of the sinner with his Saviour; he who has met Him there will not despise it. But in the last resort it is only a place: the Lord Himself is its glory, as He is its grace. Let the glory then be given to whom it belongs!"¹⁴

Such a focus on the priority of God's part in baptism is vital to an appropriate understanding of the nature of formation. It is God himself who works to bring about all the baptismal blessings which are vital to the ongoing process of our spiritual formation.¹⁵ We do not, then, shift from the realm of grace to the dictatorship of works with our progression from justification to sanctification, but rather God's gracious covenant-sustaining action continues to be at work throughout our formation. As in baptism, whilst we most certainly have a part to play in participating in God's transformational work in us, it is God who is primarily at work in this by his Spirit (Phil 2:13; 2 Cor 3:18). And it is God who underwrites the final completion of our Christ-likeness. In baptism, we are united with Christ's resurrection and we are sealed by his Holy Spirit as "the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people" (Eph 1:13). On these terms, God promises that we can look to Jesus as the "pioneer and perfecter", or "author and finisher of our faith" (Heb 12:2 KJV). We *will* grow up into Christ (Eph 4:15); Christ *will* be formed in us (Gal 4:19); and "we *will* be like him, for we will see him as he is" (1 John 3:2, emphasis added). God will, finally do this work in us, and this, far from rendering our efforts towards formation useless, provokes and empowers us for them.

All in all, God is at work in and through baptism for the believer's past, present and future.

The Baptisand

Now indeed we arrive at the part of the new believer who comes to be baptised. For Paul Fiddes the combination of "Calvinist insistence upon the enabling grace of God and Arminian affirmation of 'choosing' Christ" which affirmed the freedom of both God and humanity is part of the genius of the Baptist approach to faith.¹⁶ The free or voluntary response of the human person before God and the world is enacted in baptism. This provides an objective or concrete event which will stand as an Ebenezer or memorial stone in the believer's life (1 Sam 7:12). It is not privatised or internalised in ways which may be questioned at some future date, but rather any of those present will be able to testify that at such and such a place and on such and such a date, this person gave their testimony of God's saving work in them, and

¹³ See my exploration of these in Klose, *Covenantal Priesthood*, 83, 97–98, 180–84.

¹⁴ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 305.

¹⁵ Again, this term indicates not a causal but a correlational relationship between baptism and the constellation of blessings associated with baptism in the New Testament.

¹⁶ Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003), 39. In isolation, this comment minimises the difference between the General and Particular strands of English Baptist life, but does succeed in pointing us to their shared underlying commitment.

gave their promise in response to God's covenanting initiative. There may well be times in the believer's life when, in the trials and temptations of formation, she falls back upon these promises: God has promised and he is faithful; she has promised and she cannot, she will not turn back.

Both parties, the divine and the human, do indeed have their part to play in baptism and, while it is unconscionable to write off God's role in summoning people into covenant as it is represented in baptism, it is also dangerous to underestimate the gravity of the covenant response which the baptisand is called upon to make.

Human response to God's covenant-making is regarded with great solemnity throughout Scripture. It is in fact, a matter of life and death (Deut 30:15). It *is* God who initiates and sustains covenant but the human role is valorised rather than negated by this. In human terms, what could be more significant than the human response to such divine initiative? As Kreider outlines, the lengthy period of preparation prior to baptism in the post-Apostolic period was commensurate with this degree of gravity, given that in baptism each candidate "declares that Jesus is Lord, identifies primarily with the Christian family ('I am a Christian'), and commits himself or herself to living in a Christian way."¹⁷ Although for the early Baptists baptism preceded most of the spiritual formation which was expected to transpire in believer's lives, the connection was nevertheless strongly maintained. In baptism, either implicitly or explicitly, baptisands indicated their affirmation of covenant responsibilities toward God and their church community.¹⁸

When the gravity of the covenant undertakings given in baptism is made apparent to candidates then there is perhaps another hurdle to overcome. For some it may be that the seriousness of such a commitment may sink in all too well.¹⁹ This occurs, however, in the absence of a full grasp of the nature of such covenant-making with God. First, it must be recognised that this has already occurred. To enter into faith *is* to enter into a new covenant relationship with God. Recognition of this in baptism only serves to bring this to the baptisand's attention and to make its form explicit. Secondly, the very nature of the new covenant must be considered. As Stephen Wellum makes clear, God *has always* been gracious in his covenant-making but, contrary to Reformed formulations of Covenant Theology, the *new* covenant is indeed just that: "in the coming of Christ the *nature and structure* of the new covenant has changed, which, at least, entails that *all* those within the 'new covenant community' are people, by definition, who presently have experienced regeneration of the heart and the full forgiveness of sin (see Jer 31:29-34)."²⁰ As we have previously explored, God has already accomplished this and, through the immediacy of this new covenant relationship between himself and each believer – each one knowing him for themselves (Jer 31:29-30) and his presence with every believer by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28-32; Acts 2) – he has undertaken to bring his work to

¹⁷ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment*, 176.

¹⁸ See further discussion of this under "The Church" below.

¹⁹ In my local church setting some applicants for membership have expressed reluctance to sign a membership covenant on the basis that they fear they will be unable to fulfil its 'requirements.' This despite its clear references to God's grace, members' reliance on his enabling, and the gracious nature of authentic church community.

²⁰ Stephen J. Wellum, "Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants," in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn Wright (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 105, emphases in original.

completion.²¹ The new covenant's newness is also related to the qualitative pre-eminence of Christ's saving work: "What is the *better* nature of the covenant? It is this: because of who the Redeemer is and what he offers as a sacrifice we now have a *more effective* sacrifice and thus a *more effective* covenant; indeed we have a covenant that 'is not susceptible to the breach perpetrated in the past.'"²²

This is the context in which candidates for baptism come to make their baptismal promises in response to God's covenant summons to them.²³ God not only summons them on the basis of the covenant promises he has already made, but also provides for the believer's response, and it is on this basis that "we promise to be faithful to the Lord in terms of covenant obligations, namely, repentance, faith, and obedience."²⁴ It is God's new covenant undertaking which therefore provides the entire context for the baptisand's response. This does not negate the significance of the candidates' response but rather enables them to offer it with deep commitment in thankfulness for all that God has done, *and* with great confidence because of all God will continue to do. And again, the dynamic of formation comes into view.

The connection between baptism and formation may be understood in many ways, but one of the most striking is provided by the Pauline language of baptismal clothing. As the baptisands are immersed beneath the waters of baptism and then raised up from them, they enact the death of their old selves and their rising again to new life in Christ and in doing so, they identify themselves with Christ (Rom 6:3-4; 1 Cor 6:11; Col 2:11-14) thus participating in their formation into his likeness. Or to express it another way, we "have clothed ourselves with Christ" (Gal 3:27; see also Eph 4:24). At some point the early church developed a symbolic process of dis-robing and re-robing, of taking off their old clothes and self in baptism, and putting on new clothes and a new self – Christ.²⁵ This is the kind of image that would have come to mind for Paul's readers at Colossae when he said to them, "Do not lie to one another, *seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self*, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator" (Col 3:9, emphasis added).

In baptism, believers have thus put on Christ in a way which God himself underwrites by his new covenant undertakings. By faith, and through the gracious work of God in Jesus Christ, in baptism believers have already received all the blessings associated with baptism.

And yet... concerning Christian formation, Paul uses many of these very same terms to call his fellow believers to conduct themselves in keeping with these attributes in their daily conduct. So, following on from Col 3:9, he goes on to say, "As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

²¹ Ibid. 143.

²² Ibid. 145.

²³ Resources for such baptismal promises can be found, for example, in The Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Gathering for Worship: Patterns and Prayers for the Community of Disciples*, ed. Christopher J. Ellis and Myra Blyth (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005).

²⁴ Ibid. 106.

²⁵ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1982), 186.

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Col 3:12-14). Similarly, believers have put on Christ (Gal 3:27) and yet are still to “put on Christ” (Rom 13:14).²⁶

How can both be true? Such imperatives appear in danger of reneging on the indicatives concerning all that God has already done. For Paul baptism was indeed the time when the entirety of God’s saving work in Christ became active in believers – but they are then called to continue the process, growing into what was complete at their baptism. Paul’s meaning according to F.F Bruce is, “Be what you are’... ‘Be in ordinary practice what God’s grace has made you.’”²⁷ Putting on Christ in baptism is not simply an outward identification with him but rather is to become a “habitual association and identification with Christ... ‘being clothed with all the graces that were in him’.”²⁸

In considering this we confront one of the evangelical complaints against spiritual formation and its disciplines. Making something habitual, we know, requires a significant degree of effort. Does this not suggest that whilst we are saved by grace, we are in danger of again shifting the grounds of our spiritual formation or sanctification from grace to works? Dallas Willard is succinct concerning this: “God is not opposed to effort but to earning.”²⁹ We need to unlearn old patterns and relearn new patterns: “our hearts, wills, minds and bodies have to be retrained in new patterns of thought and behavior.”³⁰ This again points us to the kind of effort which is required. Living out our baptismal undertakings cannot be reduced to a frantic hope that when we are, perhaps suddenly, faced with the need to deny ourselves (Matt 16:24), or to regard one another as better than ourselves (Phil 2:3), or to respond “with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” (Col 3:12), we will simply be able to summon up such attitudes and patterns of behaviour on the spot. The spiritual disciplines are the means by which we slowly and steadily build these virtuous habits – a Christian habitus – and in doing so “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ” (Eph 4:15) in whom we have been baptismally clothed.

The Church

As so many of the Scripture references used in this paper to this point demonstrate, such formation is almost entirely relational: it is “a community project” which is only feasible in relationship with “one another.”³¹ In relation to baptism, this is demonstrated by its function as an initiatory rite into the church/covenant community and by the part that community plays in baptism and the formation which follows.

²⁶ For example, in Gal 5:25, believers are both proclaimed to ‘live by the Spirit’ and required to ‘keep in step with the Spirit,’ and in Rom 6:2 Christians are declared to have ‘died to sin’ but in Rom 6:11 they are urged to ‘consider themselves dead to sin.’

²⁷ Bruce, *Galatians*, 186.

²⁸ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 473.

²⁹ Jan Johnson, Keith J. Matthews, and Dallas Willard, *Dallas Willard’s Study Guide to the Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001), 107.

³⁰ Alan Andrews, “Introduction,” in *The Kingdom Life: A Practical Theology of Discipleship and Spiritual Formation*, ed. Alan Andrews (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2010), 14.

³¹ Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 164.

With our current tendency in church practice to focus heavily on the role of the baptisand, the fact that baptism is understood as a rite of initiation into the church cannot be assumed. That baptism is a personal testimony of faith in a public context is incontrovertible. But it is not only this: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13, see also Gal 3:28). Our initiation into Christ is inevitably our initiation into his body, the church.

The first challenge arises straight away in terms of what we understand this “church” to be. For many it would appear that the church in this context (if it is considered at all) is understood only in its universal form. This arises, unfortunately, from the individualism which has been layered upon the personal nature of salvation and the immediacy of Christ’s Lordship in the life of the believer, particularly within some strands of Baptist thought. For Francis Wayland, for example, since “religion is a matter which concerns exclusively the relations between an individual and his Maker,”³² the universal church, as an aggregate of saved individuals which remains a largely abstract concept, is all that matters.³³ Such an exclusive emphasis on personal regeneration relegates the local church to a place of marginal significance and membership of the entirely regenerate universal church is, in such a context, of far greater significance and appeal, than membership of the ordinary, earth-bound, flawed and intensely demanding, local expression of it. For Grenz, the outcome is inevitably that “if the visible church is soteriologically irrelevant, participation in it can quickly become, at best, motivated more by pragmatic concerns than by a sense of necessity, and at worst, merely a matter of personal preference.”³⁴ Grenz neatly summarises the view of many of those who (occasionally) fill the pews of Baptist churches.

This clearly contradicts the Baptist insistence on the priority of the local church which, in New Testament terms, is to be understood as “the visible fellowship of believers gathered in a specific location... the most concrete expression of the covenanting people.”³⁵ The relationship between the churches local and universal is such that “each church is the full manifestation in space and time of the one, true, heavenly, eschatological, new covenant church.”³⁶ Baptism, therefore, is certainly into the universal church, but it is unthinkable that this is not expressed through incorporation into a particular local gathering of believers.³⁷ On this basis, whilst baptism by immersion may indeed occur in many different practical contexts

³² Francis Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman & Co., 1857), 178.

³³ Norman H. Maring, “The Individualism of Francis Wayland,” in *Baptist Concepts of the Church: A Survey of the Historical and Theological Issues Which Have Produced Changes in Church Order*, ed. Winthrop Still Hudson (Los Angeles: Judson Press, 1959), 146. Maring, “The Individualism of Francis Wayland,” 146.

³⁴ Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Center: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 299.

³⁵ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 267.

³⁶ Donald A. Carson, “Evangelicals, Ecumenism and the Church,” in *Evangelical Affirmations*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F. H. Henry (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 366.

³⁷ This tension between the universality and particularity of the church into which we are baptised is recognised in the transfer of membership from one local church to another. A new baptism is certainly not required, but there is an acknowledgement that this is the new local church to which this baptised person now belongs.

(baptistries, swimming pools, rivers, seas and even 44-gallon drums),³⁸ baptismal practices go astray when they are removed from the context of the local church community.

The first challenge of grasping the importance of the local church is then followed by the question of the significance of it in baptism and formation. If the local church matters in this context, how is this to be understood?

The significance of the part played by the local church in baptism is borne out by the dual nature of the covenant into which the believer is baptised. Covenant with God is never undertaken in isolation but always assumes a covenant community. And this is, in fact, the cornerstone of Baptist ecclesiology from its roots in English separatism, so that based on the key text of Matthew 18:15-20, “they believed that their life together was created by the unifying presence and power of Christ, made known to them in and through the covenantal relationship they had embraced with one another in faith.”³⁹ With the seventeenth century rediscovery of the significance of believer baptism such covenant undertakings were then understood to be made in baptism itself.⁴⁰ In what form does the church then exist? It comes into being as those called by God into covenant with himself join together in that covenant status through baptism.

On this basis baptism as initiation into the new covenant with God and initiation into membership of the local church are clearly indivisible, in theology if not in practice. Our Baptist heritage indicates that practices in this regard have varied from time to time with commitment to church membership covenants being made explicit at the time of baptism or being understood as subsumed into it.⁴¹ According to Paul Fiddes, the adoption of believer baptism meant that “for most of the seventeenth century, then, Baptists clearly thought of the gathering of the local church in covenant terms, even if they did not have the ‘outward form’.”⁴² Such an outward form was, however, re-established by Benjamin and Elias Keach, whose model covenant of 1697 attempted to give equal emphasis to baptism and covenant.⁴³

Even given the understanding that baptism is *into* the local church, a third challenge is apparent in grasping that believers are also baptised *by* the local church. I was struck some time ago by a painting by a Christian artist which depicted a lone figure in baptismal waters. The choice to represent the believer alone with God was a deliberate one. We can perhaps understand this impulse but the issue it raises is critical: whilst the Christian faith is deeply personal and immediate, it is neither experienced nor expressed in individualistic isolation. So, according to Miroslav Volf, the sacraments are of a type “which no person can self-administer and yet which each person must receive personally.”⁴⁴ This is borne out by Anthony Cross,

³⁸ This latter was witnessed during a church planting visit to the Philippines when no other body of water was available and brings to mind the flexibility counselled by The Didache. Robert F. Lay, *Readings in Historical Theology: Primary Sources of the Christian Faith*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2009), 27.

³⁹ Stephen Brachlow, “Life Together in Exile: The Social Bond of Separatist Ecclesiology,” in *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B.R. White*, ed. William H. Brackney and Paul S. Fiddes (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1999), 116. See, for example, Lumpkin, “The Second London Confession of Faith (1677),” 286.

⁴⁰ Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 30.

⁴¹ B.R. White, *The English Separatist Tradition: From the Marian Martyrs to the Pilgrim Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 133.

⁴² Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces*, 31.

⁴³ Charles W. Deweese, “Baptist Church Covenants,” in *The Baptist History Collection: Source Documents*, 25.

⁴⁴ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 163.

for whom, “In the actual act of baptizing the candidate is passive, in that they ‘are baptized’ – they are in the position of receivers – and the church, through its representative and the presence of the gathered community into which the baptized is being initiated, is active, in that they baptize ‘in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit’.”⁴⁵

In this regard, it is perhaps all too easy for congregants to imagine that those who administer baptism do so incidentally, only as practically necessary facilitators of the action between God and the individual baptisand, or at most that “they” (those who administer baptism) are the church. But Cross alerts us to the potential for us to make much clearer that it is “we” the church – those committed to this local church and gathered to sponsor, bear witness and receive this person into covenant communion – who, corporately and through this representative, do the baptising.⁴⁶

And this should immediately bring those in the pews to the front of their seats. Baptism is no “spectator sport.” Those who are in committed (preferably covenant) communion with this local church might do well to consider themselves, spiritually if not physically, present in the baptistry. It is cold and wet, and the waters convey both the privilege and responsibility of participating together in baptising this new member of Christ’s body. And this, in turn, bears with it the recollection of the content and import of the member’s own baptismal vows which they should be prompted to recall and consider in this context.

The acknowledgement of the participation of the church in baptism is perhaps an affront to the baptisand’s self-sufficiency but also holds the promise of others bearing with her and supporting her in her formation. The church’s involvement in baptism is representative of its role in the formation of those who join it. The communal nature of such formation has received increasing levels of attention in recent times,⁴⁷ but the concept was certainly familiar to early Baptists. This in fact was the whole focus of their church covenants which were concerned with the formation of each member *and* the church community as a whole. Under the aegis of their covenant with God, they were, graciously and with deep awareness of their own failings, called to “walk in all holiness, godliness, humility, and brotherly love, as much as in us lieth to render our communion delightful to God, comfortable to ourselves, and lovely to the rest of the Lord’s people.”⁴⁸ They were to “watch over” one another, not suffering sin in one another and being ready to “warn, rebuke, and admonish one another with meekness,” and yet also to confidentially bear “with one another’s weaknesses, failings, and infirmities with much tenderness.”⁴⁹ This formation, rather than any

⁴⁵ Anthony R. Cross, *Recovering the Evangelical Sacrament: Baptisma Semper Reformandum* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 280.

⁴⁶ This raises the issue of the reluctance of many Australian Baptist churches to recognise any distinction between covenant members and those who, no matter how committed, have not explicitly recognised their covenant relationship with this local church. I have canvassed these issues in Klose, *Covenantal Priesthood*, 29, 38, 114, 159.

⁴⁷ See for example, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1954); Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1981); Paul Pettit, ed., *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2008).

⁴⁸ Benjamin and Elias Keach, “Covenant of Benjamin and Elias Keech (1697),” in *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, ed. Timothy George and Denise George (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 178.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

constitutional/legal rights and obligations, formed the beating heart of early practices concerning Baptist baptism and church membership.

In summary, the church does indeed have a vital role to play in both baptism and formation.

CONCLUSION

Michael O'Neil has drawn our attention to baptism's inextricable links with spiritual formation. Such formation, as Kreider's work reminds us, is vital to the church's capacity to *be the church* and to win others to Christ. Baptism is the foundational divine-human event for this formation and, through the parts played by its various participants, it provides the template for how such formation will continue across a lifetime of growth in Christ-likeness. God's role is, of course, preeminent: whether in baptism or formation, he is present and at work. Baptisands too have their role to play, responding to God's covenant summons in baptism and formation with their whole lives. And the church must play its part, baptising in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and, together, seeking to be formed in Christlikeness in their own lives and as a church community. It is our renewed grasp and practice of all this which holds great promise as we play our part and seek the renewal of the church.