

# BAPTISM: 7 Practical Perspectives

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## FOR THE REMISSION OF SINS

BY PAUL S. WILLIAMS

Christian churches have always been identified by our understanding of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In my travels I have found few churches ready to jettison these two ordinances, but I have found plenty of churches that might be soft-selling them, especially baptism.

I still remember the words my father spoke during every baptism. "I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for the remission of your sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Buried with Christ in baptism. Rise to walk in newness of life."

As a child I thought Dad was quoting Scripture. Only later did I realize that while Scripture was pretty specific about the form, not much was said about the words.

Nevertheless, when I started baptizing folks at the Hueysville Church of Christ, I used Dad's exact words. It seemed a fine thing to do. Most people I knew used similar language in the early '70s. Before I finished my work with Christ In Youth a decade later, however, I was hearing a lot of variations on the old formula. One CIY evangelist always said, "I baptize you in the name of Jesus." And that was that.

Time marches on, and now I rarely hear Dad's words in use. I suppose that is OK, but I do wonder. Have we left the words behind because we are no longer convinced of baptism's place in salvation? For several decades I lived on Long

Island, which is 72 percent Roman Catholic. They make no bones about baptism's role in salvation, though they have lost their way with its form and place as a response of a penitent believer.

I've always appreciated Robert Fife's marvelous article, "Essential to Whom," printed in **CHRISTIAN STANDARD** back in the '80s, and again a few years ago. (We've included it as part of this downloadable resource.) He made a great case for the terms of the covenant being essential for us, though God may extend his faithfulness as he wills.

I am afraid that while today's Christian churches still teach biblical baptism, we are more than a little embarrassed about the way a previous generation swung it around like a wrecking ball. Unfortunately we have hopped on the proverbial pendulum, and everyone knows where that leads.

I am not responsible for what a previous generation did. I am responsible for living according to the terms of God's covenant. If the covenant puts a high emphasis on symbols of the resurrection, then it is my responsibility to do so as well.

When I baptize, I still use Dad's words. I know there is nothing magical about them, but I am not planning to change anytime soon.

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# ESSENTIAL TO WHOM?

BY ROBERT O. FIFE

As the sun arose on a spring morning in 1945, I stood at the gates of Dachau, one of Hitler's horrendous concentration camps. It had been liberated only a few hours. I will not here attempt to describe the horror, but will say only that what you may have read in disbelief is true. Other soldiers and I could talk only in shocked whispers as we gazed upon the scene.

I did not know at the time that imprisoned within those very gates was a now famous Lutheran pastor, Dr. Martin Niemoeller. After years of harsh confinement, he and a little company of fellow prisoners of different nationalities and Christian traditions had been granted the privilege of worshipping together in Cell 34. Niemoeller had preached the Word of God and celebrated the Lord's Supper with his fellow believers.

In his words, they became the "*Una Sancta*"—the one holy church in that place. Niemoeller was a leader of the German "Confessing Church" that stood in opposition to Hitler's efforts to pervert the gospel with Nazi doctrine. (Perhaps it also is of interest to readers of this article that Niemoeller later felt it necessary to defend before his fellow Lutherans his having communed with non-Lutherans.)

After the war I heard Niemoeller preach, and read his inspiring little book, *Dachau Sermons*. My heart was moved to think that what Jesus had promised had become historically true: the gates of Hades had not prevailed against the church (Matthew 16:18).

Or was it really the church—the true church—that was in Dachau? To my knowledge, no members of "independent" Christian churches or churches of Christ were imprisoned there!

## SERIOUS QUESTIONS

What does this memory have to do with our subject? It poses a serious question to us who believe that baptism is the immersion of a penitent believer into the name of Jesus, for the remission of sins. The question is this: Was Niemoeller a Christian?

Some of us agonize over this question as we search the Word of God. Is it unbiblical to affirm that Christian baptism is "for the remission of sins"? No, for this is the very language of the Bible (Acts 2:38).

What then? Are we to understand that a believer, who for the sake of Jesus endured a dreadful ordeal in an outpost of Hell, had no right to the Christian name because he was mistaken in thinking that his christening as an infant was true

Christian baptism? The Nazis certainly thought Niemoeller was a Christian!

We are further compelled to ask, If one *misunderstands* an ordinance of the Lord, is his faith of no avail even if he "dies daily" for Jesus? (1 Corinthians 15:31). I am humbled by the thought that if persons such as Niemoeller or Bonhoeffer are to be called only "believers," perhaps I, who am also fallible and have suffered but little, should ask whether it is presumptuous for me to wear the name Christian.

*In my desire to be loyal to the Word of God have I become blind to the marvelous grace of God?*

What is this strange grace that is manifested in the lives of many unimmersed believers? In the name of Jesus they care for the orphans of Calcutta, minister in leper colonies, suffer torture in fascist and communist prisons. In the name of Jesus they leave homeland and family for martyrdom on the mission field, give sacrificially for the cause of the kingdom and gather with other believers amid threats of a hostile world. In that same name they compose hymns that bless us, write Bible commentaries that instruct us, and preach sermons that inspire us. I ask, What is this strange grace? From whence does it come?

## A SENTIMENTAL APPEAL?

Let the scene change to 1525. The Council of Zurich, Switzerland, has just decreed infant baptism as a civil law. Any person violating the law will be instantly banished. An old Hutterian chronicle continues:

It happened one day when they were meeting that a fear befell them and they felt an urge in their hearts. They bent their knees and prayed to the highest God in Heaven, asking him who knows the hearts of men to help them to do his divine will and to be merciful to them. For it was not flesh and blood or human wisdom that urged them; they knew well what they would have to suffer for this. After prayer Georg from the house of Jacob stood up and asked Conrad Grebel to baptize him for the sake of God with true Christian baptism upon his faith and recognition of the truth. With this request he knelt down and Conrad baptized him, since at that time there was no appointed servant of the Word. Afterwards the others turned to Georg in the same way, asking him to baptize them, which he did. And so, in great fear of God, they all surrendered themselves to the name of the Lord, confirmed one another for the service of the Gospel, and began to teach the faith and to keep it. This was the beginning of separation from the world and its evil.<sup>1</sup>

This moving event, undertaken at the eventual cost of their martyrdom, was most probably believers' affusion (i.e., pouring)—not immersion. We must therefore ask, Did those Anabaptist reformers have no right to the Christian name until their later discovery of immersion?

Indeed, how can we talk about who has the "right" to be called a Christian? Is it not all of grace?

Again I ask, What was this strange grace in which the marks of Jesus were revealed in the lives of those who sincerely confessed themselves faithfully obedient? "All the marks?" we are asked, "They lacked one. And seriously, it was the 'initiator' one—immersion." This is true. Yet, how did they possess the other marks without the first one? Were those marks counterfeit? How dare I ask such a question of martyrs! Is it not rather for me to ask, If they only *believed* their obedience to be faithful and authentic, can you or I possess more *certainly* and *peace* in our obedience?

Or is it possible that in his infinite grace God has deigned to impart his Spirit to all of us who have confessed and obeyed him in the full measure of our imperfect understanding? Alexander Campbell once wrote that "it is the image of Christ the Christian looks for and loves." With that great reformer, "mistakes of the understanding and errors of the affections are not to be confounded."<sup>2</sup>

I realize that these remarks may be interpreted as a sort of theological *ad hominem* argument—a sentimental appeal to popular opinion—which has little or nothing to do with God's Word. As Paul said, "Let God be true, but every man a liar" (Romans 3:4). Amen!

## THE PURPOSE AND THE ESSENCE

Then let us hear the Word of God. What *does* it say concerning the remission of sins and fellowship with God? The Scripture teaches that the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin (Hebrews 9:11-14). Only through his sacrifice can we be made holy (Hebrews 10:10).

Further, it teaches that baptism is the divinely appointed means whereby in faith we appropriate the blood of Jesus, for we are "baptized into his death" (Romans 6:1-11)<sup>3</sup>. From these and other Scriptures it is evident that the *purpose* of Christian baptism is the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. But note what we do: We extrapolate from Acts 2:38 the conclusion that since baptism is unto (*eis*) the remission of sins, it is "essential" to salvation. This shifts the discussion from the biblical language that baptism is "unto the

remission of sins," to the philosophical language of "essentiality." So we commonly hear it asked, "Do you believe that baptism is essential to salvation?"

In consequence, when some of our denominational friends hear us speak this way, they assume that because we believe the *purpose* of baptism is the remission of sins, we necessarily believe that the *essence* of the remission of sins is baptism. Thus we are often accused of teaching "water regeneration." If we feel this is a gross misrepresentation, we must share some of the blame. For we have allowed the discussion to shift from the language of the Bible to the terminology of philosophy and theology.

"What is the difference?" someone might ask. The difference is that *the "essence" of something is that without which it could not be.*<sup>4</sup> In discussing the meaning of Christian baptism we may follow the line of reasoning that uses terms such as "essential," but we ought to be aware of what we are doing.

It is true, the Bible does speak in terms that indicate essentiality. So it says, "He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life" (1 John 5:12). Jesus is the essence of our salvation. The role of baptism is to bring us to the essence. Only in this mediate, instrumental sense can we biblically regard baptism as "essential" to our salvation.

But we must go farther. We must remember that while we are in a covenant relationship with God, God and we are not on the same level. Therefore, if we would discuss whether baptism is essential to our salvation, we must ask, Essential to whom? To man? To God? To both man and God?

In the sense that the purpose of baptism is to bring us to the Savior, baptism is *essential to man*. It is a divinely given condition of the everlasting covenant mediated through the blood of Jesus and enunciated on Pentecost. We are not the initiators, but the recipients of that covenant. Therefore, we are subject to it, and bound by it. For this reason we may say that baptism is essential to man.

But does this mean that a believer's baptism is *essential to God*? Can we correctly assume that because baptism is an essential *covenant command* to which we are subject, it is an essential *covenant limitation* to which God is subject?

What does Scripture say is essential to God? One quality of the being of God is God's faithfulness. "Great is thy faithfulness," declares the prophet (Lamentations 3:23). "God is faithful," says the apostle (1 Corinthians 1:9). The ancient Christian hymn sang, "If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful: he cannot deny himself" (2 Timothy 2:13).

God will keep his covenant promise, for he is faithful. And it is his covenant commands and promises we are charged to proclaim.

Another attribute of the divine essence is gracious sovereignty. Hear the Word of God: “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion” (Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:15). God is not limited to the covenant conditions (as are we), for God is the gracious Lord of the covenant. Indeed, Jesus had to remind the Nazarenes that God’s mercy had extended beyond the commands and promises of his covenant with Israel. Profoundly offended, the Nazarenes attempted to throw him off a cliff (Luke 4:25-30).

## OUR COMMISSION AND OUR CONFESSION

But this does not permit us who are subjects of the covenant to neglect the commands and promises we are commissioned to proclaim. Nor does it permit us to say to unimmersed believers that they need not be immersed. Thankfully, it is for us to confess that God “will have mercy” on whom he has mercy. God has even had mercy on us.

It also means that we ought not be considered disloyal to the Word of God if in reverence of the grace of God we freely share the table of the Lord with all who “call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours” (1 Corinthians 1:2, *New International Version*).

We must seek every opportunity to “speak truth in love,” to share with others the joy of receiving Jesus’ name in the baptismal waters. This is the way Aquila and Priscilla treated Apollos (Acts 18:24-28). Ought we do less toward those we think in error? With praise of the Redeemer on our lips, let us freely acknowledge that it is “by the grace of God” we are what we are (1 Corinthians 15:10). And let us praise God for graciously granting his Spirit to us, even though some whom we would call brothers do not fellowship with us because they consider us to be in error.

Let us then rejoice in the communion of saints throughout the ages and around the world. I thank God that we are “not the only Christians.” How deprived—how poverty stricken—would be our estate! We would lose John Wycliffe, John Huss, Girolamo Savonarola, and Martin Luther. We would lose that wonderful “mere Christian,” Richard Baxter. We would lose John Wesley and his brother Charles, whose hymns we

rejoice to sing. We would also lose David Livingstone, Henry Whitfield, Jonathan Edwards, and Peter Marshall. We would even lose the venerable Samuel Davies, whose sermon on “The Sacred Import of the Christian Name” influenced Rice Haggard to encourage this very movement to espouse the name Christian.

No, we are not “the only Christians,” for we are preceded and surrounded by a vast host who have not heard our plea, but who love our Lord Jesus, and whose lives bear his marks. Earnestly we seek to be faithful subjects of the new covenant. Gladly we confess that God is the gracious Lord of the covenant. So let us never forbid our Lord to grant his power to those who are not of us, who have nonetheless worked wonders in his name (Mark 9:38-41).

Rather, let us earnestly strive to be “Christians only.” Let us lift up Jesus as Lord and exalt him in our congregations, faithfully proclaiming his gospel amid a lost world. And in that faithful proclamation, let us determine that we shall never place a sectarian stumbling block in the way of any sincere follower of Jesus.

Knowing the marks of Jesus portrayed to us in the Word, let us learn to recognize and love him wherever we discern his presence in the lives of others, near and far.

As we celebrate God’s grace, and honor God’s Word, we may claim once again the heritage of our fathers who sought not to be “the only Christians,” but to be “Christians only.”

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This article is adapted from an address presented during an open meeting of concerned leaders of Christian churches and churches of Christ convened in St. Louis, March 13, 1985. It was first published in *CHRISTIAN STANDARD* on August 18, 1985.

<sup>1</sup>See *Das grosse Geschicht-Buch der Hutterischen Bruder*, p. 35; [subsequent to this, an English translation has been published: *The Chronicles of the Hutterian Brethren* (Rifton: 1987); the quotation is taken from that edition].

<sup>2</sup>“Any Christians Among Protestant Parties,” *Millennial Harbinger*, 1837, p. 412.

<sup>3</sup>All Scripture quotations are from the *King James Version*, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>4</sup>*Essential* comes from the Greek word, *esse*, which means “to be.”

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*Dr. Robert O. Fife, professor, historian, and mentor to church leaders for many decades, passed away in 2003.*

# REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM

BY BRUCE E. SHIELDS

Every once in a while a professor can be very helpful. I spent several years working on a dissertation on Paul's use of creation themes in Romans, and I enjoyed my time with the professor who guided my research in Germany. Professor Stuhlmacher once asked if I had noticed that in Romans 4 there are three statements about God in parallel form. Another time, he asked me to tell him the place of salvation. I had no idea what he was driving at. He finally led me to Romans 6, and I began to understand that he was talking about baptism, which he saw as the "place" where salvation happens.

## THE TEXT

Paul makes three statements about God in Romans 4. In verse 5, Paul describes God as "him who justifies the ungodly."<sup>1</sup> God is the judge who declares the ungodly defendant not guilty.

In verse 17 he has a double description, the God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." This is God the creator.

Then in verse 24 he brings the description down to the Christian's faith, by describing God as the one "who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead."

God the judge, God the creator, and God the resurrector of Jesus is the God in whom we believe. The picture is of God as One who accomplishes things. When this God speaks, the dead are raised. When this God speaks, the universe happens. When this God speaks, salvation happens. When this God says, "You are not guilty," then you are not guilty. It's not that you should not feel guilty; it's that you *are* not guilty. This is not "let's pretend" or funny celestial bookkeeping. This God has re-created you as a righteous person.

In Romans 5, Paul tries to convey that a radical change has been made in us by God's word of judgment. He uses several different words to paint the picture: justified, peace with God, access to grace, hope, sharing God's glory, endurance, character, hope (again), God's love; and then he reminds us that God did this through the death of the Son of God for us sinners. He illustrates this by showing how much more powerful the effect of Christ's obedience has been than was the disobedience of Adam; and that brings us to Romans 6.

Romans 6 is a turn in what I call *gospel logic*. Paul has emphasized the power and the will of God in our salvation process, and he knows people will claim that if it all depends on God, we need do nothing—in fact, how we live is immate-

rial. We can sin all we want—we can live totally in the realm of Adam—and it won't affect our relationship with God.

So Paul says a big NO to that:

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! [Could be translated, *well, duh!*] How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

**Baptism.** *Baptism is immersion into Christ Jesus.* That means our baptism puts us into such a close relationship with Christ that it's like being part of him.

Paul is talking about the Christ whose obedience of God's will overshadows the disobedience of Adam. This is the Christ who was raised for our justification, and that means a new creation by the Word of God. Being in Christ is like living in the force field of God's Holy Spirit. *Baptism is immersion into Christ Jesus.* There's an old gospel song that begins, "What a wonderful change."

*Baptism is being united with the death of Christ.* Christ is the One who died for us sinners—an almost unimaginable act from the world's point of view. So whoever we were before our baptism no longer exists. "We have died with Christ."

There is no more radical way to describe it. Dead and buried is the old person—gone for good. *Baptism is being united with the death of Christ.* "What a wonderful change."

*Baptism is walking in newness of life.* Since Christ was "handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification" (4:25), we are as solidly united with his resurrection as we are with his death. The same God who gave Jesus new life enlivens us.

# Remember Your Baptism

(Continued)

We are not just saved from something; we are saved to something—to life. *Baptism is walking in newness of life.* “What a wonderful change.”

*Baptism is leaving the old, dead body of sin behind and living in freedom.* Anybody who works very long in a hospital can tell the difference between people who are still in that body of sin and those who are free from it. Death rules over the unbeliever, but life both before and after death rules in the believer. Faith and hope light up some hospital rooms. Resignation and hopelessness darken others.

Praise God, we believers who take seriously our baptism experience hope in all circumstances. *Baptism is leaving the old, dead body of sin behind and living in freedom.* “What a wonderful change.”

*But baptism is not a magical potion.* The results of baptism depend on our living like the cleansed people we are. One Bible scholar put it in good German, “*Werde was du bist,*” or “become what you are.” Romans 6 teaches that God does not do it all for us, and Romans 7 teaches that we cannot do it at all without God. But as we lean on God’s Spirit for strength and guidance, we find it possible to live a life that’s faithful to God’s standards and expectations.

*Baptism is not a magical potion;* but God’s power and our obedience make a powerful combination. “What a wonderful change in my life has been wrought since Jesus came into my heart.”

## SO WHAT?

Too often we see people acting as though their baptism was just a ritual for church membership. There is no hint of that in our New Testament. What we see in Romans, as Professor Stuhlmacher had to remind me, is that baptism is the place where God and the believer come together in such a way as to radically change that believer’s life.

Too often people appear to go into the baptistery as dry sinners and come out as wet sinners. Paul says, NO! God is at work in the act of baptism in such a way that we come out

as cleansed people, we come out as forgiven people, we come out as reconciled people, as atoned people, as redeemed people, as righteous people at peace with God, and having continual access to God’s grace.

I know that’s a mouthful, but we can simplify it by saying that in the baptism of a believer, God creates a new person—we become brand-new people.

So when life seems to be too hard for you to remain true to what you know is right, remember your baptism. When friends urge you to loosen up and go the way of the world, remember your baptism. When memories of guilt assail you in the night, remember your baptism. When the broad and easy way people around you are following beckons to you, remember your baptism. When weariness overtakes you and Satan whispers, “It’s not worth the bother,” remember your baptism. And when other people ask you what motivates you to live such a life, remember your baptism and tell them about it. “Proclaim from the housetops,” as Jesus said.

I was only 9 years old when I was baptized, but I still remember it. I was sitting in church with my grandmother, while my parents sang in the choir. I don’t recall what the preacher said that day; I don’t remember the special music All I knew was that Jesus wanted me to be baptized, and I wanted to please Jesus.

I couldn’t, of course, explain the meaning of baptism then, nor do I understand it fully now; but remembering my baptism has kept me out of a lot of tangled ways over the last 61 years. I might forget a lot of what I have learned over the years, but I pray that I always remember my baptism, so I can consider myself “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

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<sup>1</sup>All Scripture quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

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# WHAT BAPTISM REQUESTS

BY JON WEATHERLY

Why be baptized? Nearly every Christian group practices baptism in some form. Most Christians affirm that baptism is somehow important. Nevertheless, Christians today express conflicting views about baptism's meaning.

However, one segment of Christians, New Testament scholars, has in the last generation developed a significant consensus about baptism. Those whose work is to understand the New Testament in its historical, linguistic, and literary setting today express impressive agreement on the meaning of baptism in the New Testament. Disagreements persist, but the scholarly community reflects a growing, significant convergence of opinion on baptism, one that crosses over denominational lines.

The thrust of the consensus is this: In its biblical setting, baptism belonged in the context of conversion. Early Christians understood that a person should be baptized *when becoming a Christian*, not before or after.

Of course, this is the view of baptism historically affirmed by the Restoration Movement. How is it that this position has emerged as the consensus among New Testament scholars, regardless of church affiliation? It is because of the evidence of the New Testament itself, not because of the influence of modern individuals or groups.

In its original setting, baptism was an act by which a person responded to the gospel with a foundational request to God. What was that request?

## A REQUEST FOR CLEANSING

In the New Testament, baptism first appears in the ministry of John the Baptist. John preached that God's kingdom, his promised end-time rule of righteousness and peace, was near (Matthew 3:2). To be ready to receive God's blessing in that kingdom, John preached "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). In other words, John called on people to turn from being God's enemies to become his friends (repentance) and to be dipped in water (baptism).

That action of dipping was so distinctive that John became known by what was then a new word: *baptistes* in Greek, literally "the one who dips." John's Jewish audience was very familiar with religious rites of cleansing that involved dipping in water. But John's baptism was different in one obvious respect. Jewish washing ceremonies were self-administered: one dipped oneself under the water for cleansing. But in John's action, John, the prophet of God, did the dipping.

That key difference made clear the meaning of John's action: God was offering to cleanse his people from that which they could not wash away themselves: their sin. Those who asked John for baptism, then, were asking God for cleansing. The person receiving baptism addressed God with a confession—I cannot remove my own sin—and with a request—please forgive my sin and make me clean.

## A REQUEST DIRECTED TO JESUS

Of course, John also spoke of one coming who would far surpass John in his status and in the effect of his ministry (Matthew 3:11, 12; Mark 1:7, 8; Luke 3:16, 17). That one was Jesus. After his death and resurrection, Jesus commanded his followers to make others his disciples by a process that included baptism (Matthew 28:19).

As Jesus' followers practiced baptism in obedience to his command, they did it in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 22:16). To do something "in the name" of another meant to do it with reference to that person. Baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus therefore meant that the person was asking Jesus to do the cleansing from sin. Of course, God alone can forgive sins, so baptism in the name of Jesus was a powerful confession that Jesus possessed the divine authority to do what God alone can do.

In the early church baptism brought together the core of the gospel message. It declared Jesus as the divine Lord who forgives sins in fulfillment of God's great promises. At Pentecost Peter began his sermon by quoting Joel 2:32: "And everyone who calls on *the name of the Lord* will be saved" (Acts 2:21). At the end of the same sermon, he declared, "Repent be baptized, every one of you, *in the name of Jesus Christ* for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). The Lord who saves is Jesus Christ, from whom in baptism sinners request cleansing from sin, what they desperately need but cannot accomplish themselves.

## A REQUEST FOR END-TIME BLESSINGS

So baptism is rooted in the declaration that in Jesus, God fulfills his promise to establish his rule and reconcile his people to himself. It is no wonder, then, that the New Testament associates baptism with a wide range of blessings that God promised his people in what can rightly be called the "end time."

One of those blessings we have already mentioned: *forgiveness of sins*. In addition to Acts 2:38, forgiveness or cleansing is

associated with baptism in Acts 22:16 and 1 Peter 3:21. That latter text is very striking: “. . . baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God.” The point of this verse is clearer if the word translated “pledge” is understood with another of its possible meanings, “request.” In baptism the sinner asks God for a “good conscience,” that is, a conscience that has been cleansed of guilt, the result of sin.

Another end-time blessing associated with baptism is *the Holy Spirit*. Through the prophets God had promised to empower all his people with his Spirit at the time that he would bring salvation to them (Joel 2:28-32; Ezekiel 36:25-27; 39:29; Zechariah 12:10). At Pentecost, Peter declares that the promise is fulfilled: The crucified and risen Christ now pours out God’s Spirit on his people (Acts 2:22-36). Those who call on him in baptism receive that promise. Paul makes a related statement in 1 Corinthians 12:13: “We were all baptized by one Spirit into one body.”

Likewise, the New Testament associates baptism with *resurrection* and *new life*. A key promise in the prophets was that God would restore life to his lifeless people (Isaiah 26:19; Ezekiel 37:1-14; Hosea 5:15-6:3; Daniel 12). Paul connects that promise’s fulfillment to baptism, in which believers are raised with Christ to new life (Romans 6:3, 4; Colossians 2:12).

This accumulation of biblical statements is significant. It is no wonder that across confessional lines, scholars affirm that baptism signifies the sinner’s asking the Lord for the blessings of salvation, and the Lord’s responding by granting those blessings. Baptism is more than “an outward sign of an inward grace,” or “an act of obedience,” though it is at least those things. Baptism is the divinely authorized act by which the repentant sinner approaches God and in which God fulfills his promises to the repentant sinner.

## OBJECTIONS AND A WAY FORWARD

So if New Testament scholars widely agree on baptism’s meaning, why do Christians remain divided about it?

For some, baptism appears to be a work, whereas salvation comes by faith. But clearly, baptism emphasizes the *helplessness* of the sinner to do anything to be saved. It is a cry to the Lord for mercy, not a meritorious deed done to impress the Lord.

For others the objection is that as a physical act, baptism cannot affect spiritual realities. But Christian faith does not separate physical and spiritual realities. It unites them: God

entered the world as a man, died on the cross, and rose from the dead, all physical realities that are the foundation of our spiritual transformation.

Still, we must carefully clarify what we mean when we discuss baptism and salvation. Baptism *in itself* does not save; the Lord saves. But the Lord promises to save the repentant sinner who approaches him in baptism, in that act asking the Lord to bestow his gifts of salvation.

This consideration helps us understand a second objection. If baptism means what we have affirmed here, do people with faith in Jesus who do not receive biblical baptism fail to receive salvation? To many, such an outcome seems inconsistent with the gracious message of the gospel. To others, that outcome seems the necessary consequence of biblical teaching on baptism.

Remembering that in baptism the sinner asks the Lord for his gifts, we can offer a response on this issue. If a repentant sinner approaches God by some other means, can God honor such a request? Certainly God is sovereign over his gifts and can respond to any form of request. But we humans are not in a position to devise our own way of approaching the Lord. Scripture gives us only one form of request. Baptism alone has divine warrant as our occasion for making request to God.

The New Testament does not address directly the question of the unbaptized believer. The nearest example is of followers of John the Baptist who had not been baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 18:24–19:7). That situation was different from our own, but it models the response we can make. Those who believe in Jesus but have not been baptized ought to be gently taught what baptism meant biblically and encouraged to submit to it in obedient faith that seeks God’s grace.

To teach and practice baptism in the context of conversion is not to be divisive or sectarian. It is to be true to Scripture. Baptism is a richly meaningful act, commanded by Christ, in which we humbly ask the risen Lord for what he alone can give. It is a prayer that confesses our need and his supremacy. It does not detract from truth that the Lord alone saves; it confesses that truth.

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# WHAT HAPPENED WHEN I PREACHED ON BAPTISM

BY BRIAN JONES

A few years ago I finished a sermon and out of the corner of my eye noticed a couple storming toward me with clenched fists. I thought to myself, *this can't be good*.

All day, after each of our three services, people came up to me and thanked me for teaching on a topic that had confused them for years. I had worked tirelessly on the message and felt God had honored that time on my knees and at my computer. All in all it was a really good Sunday.

But not according to this couple.

Both husband and wife, professors at a nationally acclaimed Baptist university in our area, accused me of “twisting the words of the Bible” and “grievously misleading people.”

It takes a lot to rattle me. But two minutes into their tirade I felt that familiar nervousness swell up in my chest, the kind of sensation that seizes someone after he's been in an automobile accident. After their verbal blistering, I had to simply walk away; but oddly enough, they chased me down and gave me more.

Still stewing on that experience a few days later, I was struck by a number of things: First, I was amazed at how much that one negative conversation overshadowed all the many positive ones that took place. Second, I was honestly quite proud of myself for not pulling a Jackie Chan on that guy's face. But mostly I was struck by how much I am still tempted to skirt difficult topics after all these years of preaching.

One of the temptations we pastors can succumb to is preparing and delivering sermons based on the compliments, requests, flattery, and feedback of the people we serve. While we always want to preach to meet the spiritual needs of the people we serve, what if God wants us to preach on something we know most people won't agree with? What if God wants us to preach on something we know will more than likely send a bunch of people packing?

Interestingly enough, the sermon that ticked off that couple so much was titled, “Do We Teach that One Has to Be Baptized in Order to Be Saved?”

My answer?

Yes. An unequivocal, unapologetic yes.

## LOWEST DENOMINATOR

Three years ago I was invited to be a part of a gathering of megachurch and emerging megachurch pastors from among

our brotherhood. In a car ride to dinner one night I brought up this very topic and told the story of that Sunday and the angry Baptist professors. The person riding with me in the back seat leaned over and said, “You're going to find that that's not a very popular position among this group.”

You want to know a little secret? I've found it's not very popular in Christian churches of 100 either. Or churches of 200, or 500, or 800. In fact, any place that has a pastor who is like, I don't know, normal, is going to feel the pressure to back off this subject. It's human nature.

The vast majority of Christians out there think that a “salvation at baptism” position is theological heresy, or cult-like at worst. And since we live in a country where many of the people our churches reach grew up in churches with this attitude, we have a recipe for trouble.

All pastors know this. As a result, many choose to shoot for the lowest common theological denominator concerning baptism. But we do so to our church's detriment. Not because doing so is theologically wrong, though I believe it is, but because the thriving congregations pastors are trying to create come as a direct result of preaching the Bible's position on baptism, not avoiding it.

## SURPRISING RESULTS

Here's what has happened as we've preached on baptism at the church I serve:

**Churched people left, non-Christians came.** I view churchd people leaving as incredibly positive. We're a church that has stated from day one that we want to grow through conversion growth, not transfer growth. So doing things that cause people visiting from other churches in our area to leave is celebrated here.

In fact, I'm one of the only pastors I know who stands up on Christmas, Easter, and other big days of the year and *un*-invites churchd people from our church. “If you are attending a Bible-teaching church,” I tell them, “Please don't come back. This church isn't for you.”

The result? The non-Christians who stay come with few preconceived ideas regarding baptism. As a result they are much more theologically malleable. In fact, I've found that the more we've taught on baptism, the more churchd people

# What Happened When I Preached on Baptism

(Continued)

have left, and the more non-Christians have come to Christ and brought their non-Christian friends.

Preaching baptism spurs church growth *with the right people*, it doesn't impede it. While growing from 0 to 1,300 and experiencing 769 baptisms in eight years might not seem like much compared to some other churches/places in the country, out here in the East that's growth at a pretty good clip.

## **Our church's respect for scriptural authority increased.**

One of our church's values is, "The Bible alone dictates what we believe and practice." That's been our mantra since day one, and it's been tested every step of the way. I remember like yesterday what I consider the watershed event that breathed life into that statement.

When our church was just two months old, I was teaching our 101 class called Starting Point. In that class I cover the who, what, where, when, and why of our church, and then end with a detailed explanation of what Jesus did on the cross and how we can accept his forgiveness for our sins.

At the end of the discussion a friend of mine, a guy who had been there since our church was meeting in my house, the biggest giver in the entire church, raised his hand.

"Wait a minute. Are you telling me I have to be baptized to become a Christian?"

"No, I'm not saying that. Those Bible verses we just read tell us that God is saying that."

"I don't believe that at all," someone else chimed in.

"That's crazy," another woman said in a heated tone.

Ten minutes later I had an all-out revolt on my hands. There were 23 people in that class, all from other churches, and I had managed to tick off every single one of them simply by suggesting that the Bible paints salvation as something that occurs at baptism. (I have since learned that, by and large, only churched people like attending these 101 kinds of classes.)

It was mass chaos. People were shouting at me. Fingers were waving.

Finally someone said, "I don't think this is the kind of church I want to be a part of."

Immediately the room tensed up, as if a line had been drawn in the sand. All eyes were on me to see how I would respond.

I waited for a moment and tried to collect my thoughts. I began to feel an odd stillness in my center, a sense of peace, a reassurance that what I was about to let out of my mouth was going to define our small, fledgling church plant.

I raised my hand in the air and said, "Excuse me. Please give me a moment here. I want to make sure I make one thing very clear: I couldn't care less if every single one of you leaves this church. We're not changing what we teach on this issue."

Then I closed with prayer.

And they left, every single one of them, along with the biggest giver in the church. Every single person left the church.

And looking back, I know it was THE defining moment in the life of our church. Not because we cleared up the issue of baptism once and for all, but because submission to biblical authority was drilled into our church's soul from the very beginning. It's now an indelible part of our DNA.

## **A WORD TO PREACHERS**

Pastors, if you're like me, and you struggle at times with wanting to please people through what you say on Sundays, we'll do well to heed the advice of the great fourth-century pastor Chrysostom. In Book 5, section 7 of *On the Priesthood*, his preaching "how-to" book for pastors of his day, he graciously urged,

Let, therefore, the man who undertakes the strain of teaching never give heed to the good opinion of the outside world, nor be dejected in soul on account of such persons; but laboring at his sermons so that he may please God, (For let this alone be his rule and determination, in discharging this best kind of workmanship, not acclamation, nor good opinions,) if, indeed, he be praised by men, let him not repudiate their applause, and when his hearers do not offer this, let him not seek it, let him not be grieved. For a sufficient consolation in his labors, and one greater than all, is when he is able to be conscious of arranging and ordering his teaching with a view to pleasing God.

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# CHRISTIAN STANDARD Interview: JOE GRANA

BY BRAD DUPRAY

As a professor, **Joe Grana** has wrestled with the theology of baptism. As a minister, he has seen it worked out in the most practical sense. The combination of those points of view has brought him to a perspective on baptism that meets the spiritual challenges of real-world Christianity. Joe has served in the pulpit, leading churches in three different states as a senior minister for 27 years. Today, he is chairman of the church ministry department at Hope International University in Fullerton, California. Joe is a graduate of Lincoln (Illinois) Christian College, holds post-graduate degrees from Lincoln Christian Seminary and Hope, and a PhD from the University of Dubuque (Iowa) Theological Seminary.



## **What happens between a person and God when that person is baptized?**

I like to think of it as a total experience. It's a relational experience in that you hear God's Word, you believe in Jesus as Christ, you repent of your sins, and you "turn around." Baptism, then, is an expression, as a natural result of that relational process.

## **Why is baptism such a big deal in the Christian church?**

I put it in two categories: one would be scripturally, because baptism is a big deal in Scripture. But also, within the Restoration Movement, in particular Thomas and Alexander Campbell, there is a high view of baptism.

## **Christian church theology has been viewed by some as "water regenerationist." Is that a fair analysis?**

Sometimes that's true. But it's not true when the right personal and biblical process takes place. The water isn't mystical or magical. It goes back to that relationship where one surrenders his or her life to Jesus—thus the image of immersion into the death, burial, and resurrection, as we die to ourselves and our sins and we are resurrected to a life in Christ. If you do that, it's not water regeneration. For some people, when they're baptized, their whole life changes. For some people, they just get wet.

## **How does one keep from "just getting wet?"**

They really search their soul, really connect with the Lord, and then proceed out of faith. I don't know that everyone fully understands the implication of the decision. There were groups in the early church who put off baptism for three years and went through a training period to make sure they were proceeding in faith. I personally wouldn't go that far, but I think there's some value in training, in challenging accountability, rather than baptizing anyone who walks down the aisle.

## **Wasn't the New Testament model to baptize people right away?**

In the book of Acts it appeared that people were baptized in close proximity to their statement to faith, which I still adhere to. But you also see cases of personal instruction, like Paul with the Philippian jailer and Phillip with the Ethiopian eunuch.

## **How was baptism viewed in the context of the first-century Christian?**

We call baptism and the Lord's Supper *ordinances*, but often the word *sacrament* is used. A *sacrament* is an oath of allegiance. In the Roman culture, civilians were called pagans. When some people took a sacrament, an oath of allegiance, they could become military personnel. The early church took that concept and said that unbelievers are pagans. When you take the sacrament, that is, the oath of allegiance, baptism, and then the Lord's Supper, now you are under the authority of Jesus, contrasted with the soldier who is—or was—under the authority of Caesar.

## **Can't baptism be seen as a work, or something you do to try to earn salvation?**

You don't baptize yourself, someone else baptizes you. You submit yourself and someone else is doing it. On the other hand, to repent is an awful lot of work! That's supposed to come, in anybody's book, before you're baptized. Others have the sinner's prayer. It seems that is work too. I think the issue is nitpicking. Jesus did the main work. We simply follow his directions.

## **It's certainly a matter of strong personal reflection.**

In thinking about my own baptism, it was a defining moment. I was baptized on the same day as my mother and sister, so it has great spiritual and emotional significance to me. Not having been raised in the church, it was certainly a transforming point of my life that changed the direction in which I was going, forever.

## **Can a person be saved without being baptized?**

I think of all the different scenarios, like a person accepts Christ on Thursday, plans to be baptized on Sunday, and dies in between. God knows this person's heart. He's not that legalistic—and that's where the relationship overrides the proposition. Baptism is an essential part of the conversion experience. It's a total package, but are there other circumstances? Yes, and I leave all that up to God.

## **In our movement, baptism has been characterized as "a part of" the plan of salvation.**

I have a biblical answer and a theological answer to issues like these. I think everyone who hasn't been immersed should be. That's what Scripture teaches. But for the pious unimmersed, or those who have never submitted to baptism, I don't feel like it's my place to judge their salvation—it's between them and God. For example, I'd be pretty surprised if I didn't see Mother Teresa in Heaven, but to my knowledge she was never immersed. That in no way diminishes my view of baptism or immersion, but I think sometimes we are more legalistic than God is. I'll leave it up to him to make those judgments.

## **Does the Christian church overemphasize baptism relative to other important points of theology?**

Yes, I think we do. Often we don't discuss enough faith or repentance or our relationship with Jesus. I think there's a fundamental issue for me—we have made the Christian faith more propositional than relational. Although there are some important propositions, the truths we believe in, we sometimes place those over the relationship with Christ, and thus the relationship is lost or diminished.

## **On the other hand, do other evangelical movements underemphasize it?**

Yes, I would say they do. Some say you're baptized into the church, or it's a work to be done after you've been saved. Again, I go back to it being a central part of the conversion experience. It's the sacramentum, the oath of allegiance, that changes you from one state to another. Much like a wedding ceremony takes you from being unmarried to married.

## **How can we connect with churches that have a different theology of baptism without giving up our principled position?**

We can cooperate in common causes and I think we can find our unity in the person of Jesus as the Son of God. We can find a unity and a common purpose to serve and evangelize and yet still believe what we believe. We can agree to disagree, and we can disagree without being disagreeable.

## **What about with our movement? Are we united or divided on this issue?**

We have a spectrum of theological understanding. Our movement has a spectrum of church backgrounds and, as a result of that, there will always be differences. It's all a growth process. The important thing is we're struggling, and we're growing, and we can still be united even if we're not in total agreement. For me, total agreement is not a criteria for unity or fellowship. In my life experience there is no one that I am in complete agreement with. Not even myself! And if I can say it, I'm not always in agreement with God. I know he's right and he's righteous, but there are some things I wish were different than they are. Therefore if unity or fellowship is contingent upon agreement, I'm going to be totally alone.

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# UNDERSTANDING FOUR VIEWS OF BAPTISM

BY MARK S. KRAUSE

Baptism has been a contentious doctrinal and practical issue in the churches of the Restoration Movement since the movement's inception in the first half of the 19th century. In the last two decades or so, these churches have had an expanded circle of influence due to the growth of mega-churches and the rise of Restoration Movement scholars who have earned respect in the larger evangelical world.

This widening circle has gone both ways, however. Many churches today are staffed by ministers and staff who have no concept of an "historic position" for the Christian churches and churches of Christ with regard to baptism. Doctrinal understanding of baptism is often borrowed from other evangelical traditions or watered down to be inoffensive to the largest possible audience.

Zondervan recently published a helpful book in this area, *Understanding Four Views on Baptism*.<sup>1</sup> This comes in the "Counterpoint" series, in which four scholars from distinct traditions each writes an essay on the topic that represents his tradition's understanding. Each essay is followed by responses from the other three authors containing their points of agreement and critique.

The four traditions represented are the Baptist, the Reformed (mainly Presbyterian), Lutheran, and Christian churches/churches of Christ (hereafter CC/CoC). The book's editor, John Armstrong, defines the primary issue as, "What is the meaning and significance of baptism?" (p. 162), also stated as, "What does baptism mean and why is it important?" (p. 163). All of these authors come from traditions that value the authority of Scripture to understand this issue (p. 20), but they approach the scriptural information in different ways.

One might conclude there are no real surprises in this book for those who know the doctrines of these traditions, but that would be a hasty opinion. Perhaps the biggest surprise is that the CC/CoC has even been given a place at this table of discussion. Our position has long been dismissed by most evangelicals as "water regenerationist" or "baptism is necessary for salvation," without much consideration.

Armstrong chooses John D. Castelein of Lincoln (Illinois) Christian College and Seminary as the representative of the CC/CoC, and this proves to be an excellent choice. His essay presents both the central agreements about baptism from a Restoration Movement point of view while also admitting areas of freedom and divergence.

## SEARCHING FOR A PLACE

Generalizations in reviewing a book like this are dangerous but necessary, so permit me to make one. It seems to me the Baptist, Reformed, and Lutheran authors present a theology in search of a place for baptism.

For example, Thomas J. Nettles, the Baptist representative, approaches baptism from an absolutist, dogmatic position that sees no connection whatever between faith-salvation-justification and baptism (p. 25). Nettles wants to respect the Scriptures, but his theological presuppositions require interpretations that leave me shaking my head.

This reaches an almost humorous extreme when he categorically asserts that "the washing of our bodies with pure water (Hebrews 10:22), being born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5), the washing of regeneration (Titus 3:5), and the washing of water with the word (Ephesians 5:26) point not to baptism but to the reality of the Spirit's powerful application of the word for salvation" (p. 148).

Huh? All of these Scriptures are obvious references to baptism, which was a central activity of the early church, but for Nettles, they must be dismissed via theological principle if his position is to be maintained. The result of this is that Nettles tries to explain Christian baptism as a continuation of the work of John the Baptist, a claim that Castelein quickly refutes as "strange, to say the least" (p. 56). This leaves one wondering why those of Nettles's persuasion would baptize at all. As Castelein concludes, Nettles has "artificially divorced" faith from baptism (p. 53).

## COVENANT AND MYSTERY

The same could be said for the Reformed (Calvinist) tradition, capably represented by Richard L. Pratt Jr. Pratt understands no real distinction between the Old Testament people of God and the New Testament church, thereby establishing a theology of one covenant with many dispensations. Thus, the meaning of baptism is not found in examining the New Testament alone, but also by considering Old Testament patterns (p. 65).

The result of this theological edifice is to equate the baptism of the church with circumcision in the Old Testament, and thereby give full justification for the baptism of infants. In this way of thinking, baptism is not directly related to salvation, but a way of incorporating people into the covenant community, whether they are true believers or not.

The Lutheran presentation, given by Robert Kolb, is less

systematic than the Baptist or Reformed. This is because Kolb admits to a certain level of “mystery” in the meaning and significance of baptism. For example, Kolb says the manner in which baptism works with infants is “beyond explanation” (p. 104). (Such an admission is somewhat refreshing, for it is nice to find a theologian who doesn’t think he knows everything.) However, this eventually leads Kolb to present two theologies of baptism; one for infants and one for adults (see Nettles’s criticism of this, p. 114). We in the CC/CoC camp would find much to agree with in Kolb’s baptismal theology for adults, but not in his explanation of the baptism of infants.

## CONCISE AND INFORMATIVE

Castelein’s presentation is concise and informative. I am surely prejudiced in my evaluation (because he is my friend), but he seems to present baptism as a New Testament precedent and then seeks a theology that builds upon it rather than the other way around. Baptism therefore becomes central, and the many things the New Testament has to say about it are important and must be considered.

Castelein identifies the primary issues in the debates about baptism: *why?* *who?* and *how?* In the *who?*, he generally agrees with Nettles that the New Testament does not recognize infant baptism because “it did not occur” (p. 136). He also agrees with the Baptist position that immersion is the proper *how?* based on the meaning of the Greek terms for “baptize,” the nature of the ways baptism is used symbolically for death/burial/resurrection in the New Testament, the evidence of the earliest churches, and from an historical appreciation of the history of the development of the practice of sprinkling as baptism (pp. 139, 140).

However, he differs sharply from the Baptist position as to the *why?* of baptism. This is very important, perhaps more important than the first two; those who believe that the CC/CoC agree with the Baptists on baptism should read his discussion carefully.

An important distinction between Castelein and the other authors is his underlying presupposition that the best choice is to restore baptism to the understanding and practice of the New Testament church. This, of course, is a cardinal principle of the Restoration Movement, but it does not seem to be a primary commitment for any of the other traditions represented. The restoration project may sometimes run ahead of theological understanding, but that does not mean it is ill advised. The result has been a doctrine that is easily defended by biblical reference and not as prone to theological distortion and wayward historical influence.

## ELEPHANTS IN THE ROOM

It is unfair to be too critical of a book for what it does not do, but I must note a couple of things. To me, two elephants in the room receive scant attention. One is the Roman Catholic practice of baptism. This is important, because all four of the traditions have been historically shaped, in part, in reaction to Roman Catholicism (or Anglicanism). One must weigh whether a doctrinal position is biblical or simply reactionary. There is no question but that this influenced the views of the Restoration Movement, for anti-Catholic polemic is found often in the writings of the 19th century. An essayist representing the Roman Catholic tradition might have clarified some things.

The related elephant is the issue of original sin. This does not come out clearly until the end of the book, when Kolb (the Lutheran) challenges Castelein’s lack of appreciation for “the depth of sin’s permeating power in our lives” (p. 158). The Roman Catholic, Augustinian understanding of the necessity for infant baptism is largely driven by the doctrine of inherent depravity. The Baptist, Reformed, and Lutheran traditions all affirm this doctrine in some form, and it has an effect on their understanding of baptism. The Restoration Movement traditionally has not understood universal sinfulness as an inherited condition, and this makes a big difference in the meaning and significance of baptism for our churches.

## DISCOVERING SOURCES

All in all, the careful and inquisitive reader will appreciate this book, for it reveals the source of many views of baptism that currently are circulating in our churches. Castelein provides a very helpful chart that shows the various positions in relation to two extreme positions (p. 125).

One extreme is represented by the Roman Catholics and Orthodox, who view baptism as causing or effecting salvation. For them, baptism is everything. The other extreme is represented by the Salvation Army and the Friends who find no function in baptism at all, and therefore do not practice it. For them, baptism is nothing.

We should be aware and thankful for the rich tradition we have as heirs of the Restoration Movement in this crucial area.

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<sup>1</sup>John H. Armstrong, ed., *Understanding Four Views on Baptism* in the Counterpoint Series, Paul E. Engle, series editor (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

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