

## Baptism in the Patristic Age, the Reformation, and the Debate Concerning Baptism Today

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*Abstract:* This article concerns itself with aspects of the theology and practice of baptism in the Patristic era, the Reformation, and the recent Trilateral Dialogue on Baptism. It examines the assumptions at work in patristic texts concerning inward and outward baptism and the Holy Spirit's role in them, using John Chrysostom's baptismal catechesis as a detailed example. The essay goes on to examine the Anabaptist reclaiming of this understanding by means of the human response to the divine initiative. It then examines agreements and disagreements concerning baptism expressed in the Trilateral Dialogue, focusing especially on the nature of salvation, the co-existence of credobaptism and pedobaptism, and the notion of a "mere symbol."

One of the remarkable and unresolved developments in the history of the church is the diversity in its practice of baptism. There is widespread scholarly agreement today that the fragmentary New Testament records of baptism take for granted that its candidates are old enough to make their own profession of faith. The question of "household baptism" in the New Testament is sometimes raised but it is an argument from silence on both sides. By this I mean that neither side can argue concretely on the basis of historical evidence.

The goal of this article is to compare aspects of baptismal practice in the Patristic Age, the Reformation, and a recently completed Trilateral Dialogue on Baptism by Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites in order to see if these selective comparisons help to reconfigure the ancient debate.<sup>1</sup>

While biblical evidence has pride of place, developments in the theology and practice of baptism in subsequent generations and settings need to be taken into account as well. Until recently the biblicism of Free

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1. I wish to thank John Hill, Anglican liturgical scholar, for his helpful insights and criticisms of this paper.

Churches<sup>2</sup> has meant that they devoted relatively little study to church life in the patristic and middle ages.<sup>3</sup>

Alan Kreider was in the forefront of a generation of Free Church historians who have done original analysis of trends in patristic ecclesiology, engaging scholars from other traditions. His primary focus was on worship and catechesis.<sup>4</sup>

When the first wave of ecumenical scholarship on worship and sacraments in the patristic church began in the middle of the twentieth century, researchers recovered long lost liturgies, wrote analyses of them, and often proposed that they should be the basis for the reform of worship in the present. These scholars tended to generalize from a single church—usually Constantinople or Rome—presuming that they were the universal norm. A second, more recent, wave of scholarship, by contrast, has been impressed with the diversity and fluidity of worship life in that era. This shift from uniformity to diversity has provided a place for Free Churches, like Mennonites, at the table of historical research and pastoral application.<sup>5</sup> Even though clear patterns of worship evolved in different parts of the Mediterranean world, they are marked as much by diversity as by uniformity. Of particular interest to the Free Churches has been Paul Bradshaw's radical challenge to the movement—why single out the era in which the church was negotiating the union of church and state as the liturgical norm?<sup>6</sup>

This broadening of the geographic scope of ancient liturgical studies has allowed for the rediscovery not only of lost documents but also of lost issues. In this essay I hope to show that these overlooked themes are relevant to a post-Christendom church in the West and a missionary church in the Global South. One such lost issue is the gradual nature of the transition in church practice from “credo” baptism to “pedo” baptism<sup>7</sup>—that is, from baptism on confession of faith to infant baptism.

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2. Historically these are churches that are free of institutional and ideological alliances with the state and are free from the state's approval of their form of worship.

3. Everett Ferguson, from the Churches of Christ, is a rare exception. His work was first published in 1960. See, *Early Christians Speak: Faith and Life in the First Three Centuries* (Austin, Texas: Sweet, 1971).

4. As introductions to his scholarship see *Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom* (Cambridge: Grove, 1995) and *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press, 1999).

5. Paul Bradshaw, one of the most published leaders of the second wave, summarized the state of scholarship in the field in “The Liturgical Use and Abuse of Patristics,” in *Liturgy Reshaped*, ed. Kenneth Stevenson (London: SPCK, 1982), 134-145. See also Paul Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (New York: Oxford, 1992).

6. Bradshaw, “The Liturgical Use,” 134.

7. A linguistic novelty to overcome labels that seemed unfair to one party or another. See Kevin Roy, *Baptism, Reconciliation and Unity* (Carlisle UK: Paternoster, 1997), 11-12.

It is increasingly clear that credobaptism remained the norm in parts of the Empire, and beyond it, until a century after Constantine. This means that the ascent of Constantine and gradual movement toward a state church was only one of several trends in the development of infant baptism in the patristic era. The practice of pedobaptism for the children of some Christian parents was already attested to by the mid-second century. But pedobaptism expanded to become the initiation rite of all infants in the realm only in the course of the fifth, and in some areas in the sixth, century.

At the same time, however, baptism on confession of faith continued to persist. This was the case for two main reasons. First, whether out of conviction or caution, many Christians still asked for believers' baptism. There is ample liturgical and catechetical evidence of rigorous preparation of adult candidates for initiation.<sup>8</sup> Second, the missionary stance of the church required the continuation of credobaptism as pagans accepted Christ and were incorporated into the church. In addition, as the union of church and state progressed, political leaders called on the church to Christianize newly conquered populations. The outcome of this development was the mass, usually coerced, baptism of pagan adults.

Critics of established churches have often seen this later progression as the imposed norm from Constantine's ascendancy onward. On the other hand, advocates of infant baptism have often claimed that credobaptism persisted only in missionary settings. The evidence is that credobaptism continued, albeit in varying degrees, in settings where the church had already taken root.<sup>9</sup>

The debate has also shifted on another point. The baptism of children and infants in the early patristic church was not a universal practice. It concerned only the offspring of believers amid the gathered congregation, in which both the believer and the congregation made a concrete promise to raise the child toward Christ. Frederick Bauerschmidt and Alan Kreider have espoused insightful, if contrary, interpretations of the evolution of this baptismal practice.<sup>10</sup>

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8. Kreider, *Change of Conversion*, 37-42.

9. Alfons Fuerst arrived at this conclusion on the basis of how long baptisteries for adult candidates continued to be built and used, in several settings ringing the Mediterranean Sea until the ninth century.—*Die Liturgie der alten Kirche* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2008), 169, 177-180. He noted that shallower and smaller fonts for infants began displacing the larger ones from the fifth to the seventh century.—*Ibid.*, 173.

10. Cf. *On Baptism: Mennonite-Catholic Theological Colloquium* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 2004), esp. Bauerschmidt, "Baptism in the Diaspora," 16-62, "Summary Response," 118-127; Kreider, "Response," 80-86, and "A Post-Dialogue Conversation," 112-117.

One of the goals of this study is to look carefully at the assumptions at work in a number of patristic theological and liturgical texts. In most of them God's initiative, not only in Spirit (inward) baptism but also in water (outward) baptism, is the foundational premise. While the texts placed great weight on preparing people who had come of age for baptism, in the making of the sacrament their response was secondary to the divine initiative that regenerated them in a washing with water. We will particularly pursue two questions. One, is this premise that the Spirit regenerates through the medium of water a legitimate deduction from the New Testament and New Testament era documents like the *Didache*? Two, is the premise of Anabaptism and its kindred movements that Spirit and water baptism are two different realities, a legitimate deduction from these same documents?

### THE EARLY PATRISTIC AGE

The early church inherited its baptismal literary images, like the Crossing of the Red Sea, largely from Judaism,<sup>11</sup> joining them to other artistic images and Greek thought forms when the church entered the Gentile world.<sup>12</sup> This included a collision with Gnosticism because it denied the incarnation.<sup>13</sup> There seem not to have been many conflicts concerning the form of baptism. Immersion was preferred, probably influenced both by Jewish proselyte practice<sup>14</sup> and Pauline theology. But there are early records of pouring and sprinkling where that was more practical.<sup>15</sup> The association of the Spirit with Jesus' baptism, it was reasoned, could also be dramatized in the act of sprinkling or pouring. From third-century written records we know that the formula stated in Jesus' commissioning of his followers (Mt. 28:19)—namely, baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—displaced baptism simply in the name of Jesus, as found in the Acts of the Apostles. Both of these practices were already present in the *Didache*, the earliest post-New Testament manual for ceremonies, probably composed in the first century.

1. Regarding baptism. Baptize as follows: after first explaining all these points [above], "Baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Mt. 28:19) in running water. 2. But if you have no

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11. Jean Danielou, *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Servant Press, 1979), 35-113.

12. Enrico Mazza, *Mystagogy* (New York: Pueblo Press, 1989), 154-174.

13. Josef Jungman, *The Early Liturgy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University, 1977), 112-120.

14. Adela Collins, "The Origins of Christian Baptism," in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*, ed. Maxwell Johnson (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 41-47.

15. See the *Didache*. Tertullian says of the act of baptism that the difference in the mode of baptism is not significant.

running water, baptize in other water; and if you cannot in cold then in warm. 3. But if you have neither, pour forth water on the head three times, "in the name of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit." 4. But before baptism, let the baptizer and the candidate for baptism fast, as well as are able.<sup>16</sup>

The earliest extant post-apostolic description of the *act* of baptism is the mid-second-century account by the presbyter Justin Martyr. The baptismal fragment in his *First Apology* has a novelty, in that it specifies a fixed progression in the baptismal dynamic.

Those who are convinced and believe what we say and teach is the truth, and pledge themselves to be able to live accordingly, are taught in prayer and fasting to ask God to forgive their past sins, while we pray and fast with them. Then we lead them to a place where there is water, and they are regenerated in the same manner in which we ourselves were regenerated.<sup>17</sup>

Here we encounter, less than a century after Paul's letters to the Romans (5:19-21; 3:22-24; 12:1-2) and the Colossians (2:11-12; 3:5-10), elements of coming to faith that resemble those of Paul: believing the proclamation of the Gospel, asking for forgiveness of sins, and pledging to live accordingly. Then the text describes something that is not explicit in the Gospels and Paul. When the candidates have believed and committed, prayed and fasted, they are "regenerated" in the water of baptism.

This description is baffling for people from lean sacramental traditions. If candidates have pledged themselves to live according to the Gospel and asked God for forgiveness, aren't they already "regenerated," made holy by God? What more needs to happen? In order to address this crucial question we need to trace, however briefly, the strands of apostolic reflection on baptism. It is widely agreed that Jesus' baptism in water and the Spirit (Mk. 1:4-11 and parallels) is the model for the initiation of converts.<sup>18</sup> Added to that is Jesus' challenge to the disciples to be initiated "with the baptism with which I am baptized" (Mk. 10:38-39). A good case can be made that metaphorical and literal meaning are not mutually exclusive in this saying. In other words, it also refers to water baptism.<sup>19</sup>

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16. Thomas Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: West and East Syria* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 36.

17. Thomas Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1992), 38-39.

18. Kilian McDonnell and George Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994), 87, 134; G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), 63-67.

19. McDonnell and Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism*, 7, 14, 43.

Paul arrived at his understanding of baptism through these two images—the gift of the Spirit (I Cor. 12:13) and dying with Christ (Rom. 6:1-11, Col. 2:11-13). In Acts the gift of the Spirit and water baptism are a single reality, although the order in which they are given varies. In Acts 2:38 the order is preaching, repentance, baptism, forgiveness, reception of the Spirit. In Acts 10:44-48 the order is preaching, Spirit, baptism. In Acts 19:1-7 the order is preaching, repentance, baptism, laying on of hands/Spirit. This variation suggests two things: first, that the Spirit is sovereign—there is not an automatic progression; second, that faith, water baptism, and the giving of the Spirit are of a piece.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, baptism is more than a vivid simile for conversion, or a tangible metaphor for an illusive mystical experience, or an outward image for an inward reality. It is also a condensing of what has happened inwardly over time into a pregnant outward moment.

Justin's pastoral references to baptism are not a major factor in the development of early patristic baptismal theology. But he pinpoints what Free Church exegetes and theologians still consider a problem: baptism in water as the regenerating work of the Spirit that goes beyond the Spirit's previous inward working. In Justin's defense it might be said that he understands the initiator of both the inward and outward stages of conversion to be the Spirit. The gist of the argument is that it is not the water itself that regenerates, but rather that in the water the Spirit is locally present. It is *in* the water that the Spirit regenerates, bringing about the dying and rising of the believer in Christ.<sup>21</sup> Increasingly, though, the sacred water itself was endowed with the power of regeneration.

Because of that and what it leads to, Justin's claim that the medium of the Spirit is the water is a striking novelty to the sacramentally lean Protestant ear. Neither the Synoptics nor Peter nor Paul stipulate *how* we die with Christ and receive the Spirit in conversion and baptism. The skeptical Protestant mind worries that the ever-expanding patristic emphasis on correct ritual form forfeits the delicate balance among the Spirit as the agent, faith as the recipient, and the water as the location of the sacramental act. As we will see in later liturgies, the power of regeneration seems to reside more and more *in* the water of baptism in the sense of the water itself as the instrument of salvation. Paul Bradshaw confirms this development.

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20. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, 167-170.

21. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism*, 91. A more developed but similar notion of a sacrament is found in the "Blessing of the Font" in the sixth century Leonine Sacramentary, "that your hand may be laid upon this water that you may cleanse and purify the lesser man . . . that he, putting aside all that is deathly, may be reborn."

All of this had a profound effect on the nature of the baptismal process itself. Whereas in primitive Christianity it had functioned as a ritual expression of a genuine conversion experience that candidates were already undergoing in their lives, now in the fourth century the baptismal process became instead the means of conveying a profound experience to the candidates in the hope of bringing about their conversion. In order to accomplish this new role, the process became much more dramatic.<sup>22</sup>

This is not, as I read it, an inherently anti-sacramental argument, but an argument against breaking apart the unity of proclamation, Spirit, faith, and water in the unselfconscious ritual practice of the church in Acts and immediate post-apostolic generations.

A loose parallel in this evolution concerns the Eucharist. More and more, the bread and wine themselves become the instruments of God's presence. It needs to be said, however, that in the early patristic era there was not yet a fixed correlation between the sacrament, its ceremony, and its spiritual reality.<sup>23</sup> Neither exegesis nor liturgy had yet been put into a completely set form.<sup>24</sup>

By the early third century, periods of persecution afflicting the church had shaped baptismal formation. The oppression of the church made it clear that one had to pledge one's loyalty either to Christ or Caesar. Arriving at such a choice required a new depth and length to catechesis. The *Apostolic Tradition of Hippolytus*, which had a lasting influence on the patristic church in the West, was probably compiled during this time. Its detailed instructions for the preparation of candidates reflects its context. Remarkably, the *Apostolic Tradition* contains a complete service of baptism and the Lord's Supper. "Newcomers to the faith" are first examined for their faithfulness in relationships. Those in certain occupations, like pimps and gladiators, must give up their job. Soldiers, if they remain in their role, must disobey orders to kill. Those who are accepted by the church will participate in the catechetical process for up to three years, until evidence for their conversion is clear. Until they have reached the end of their instruction the candidates will join the baptized on Sundays only for the readings, prayers, and sermons.<sup>25</sup>

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22. Paul Bradshaw, *Early Christian Worship* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2010), 22.

23. The editor of the fourth-century *Apostolic Constitutions* makes it clear that if the oil and chrism are not available, the water is enough.—E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 1970), xxi.

24. It should be remembered that before the age of printing both the scribe, copying the manuscript, made intended and unintended changes, and the presider at a service expanded and conflated prayer and ceremony according to the needs of the situation.

25. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt*, 46-51. One of Alan Kreider's distinctive contributions to patristic studies is the evidence he presented for a rigorous

Before baptism, each candidate is examined as to whether she has “lived with integrity.”<sup>26</sup> Both the candidate and the instructors answer. All those who can answer “yes” are set apart and exorcised. They fast for the days before baptism. Then comes the surprise. At the baptism the participants

... shall take off their clothes. First baptize the children. Let those who can, speak for themselves. But those unable to speak for themselves, let their parents or someone from their family speak for them. Then baptize the men and finally the women.<sup>27</sup>

Even though the *Apostolic Tradition* made provision for those unable to speak for themselves, the detailed instructions for the ritual have to do exclusively with believers: they are instructed at several points in the liturgy to speak for themselves. For example, they are called on to answer “yes” four times to the claims of the Apostles’ Creed.<sup>28</sup>

Many scholars have concluded that the *Apostolic Tradition* was enlarged over time as pastoral need required. With that in mind, it is thinkable that the only three lines of this comprehensive text that refer to child and infant baptism mark the expansion of an older liturgical order focused entirely on candidates who can answer for themselves. It is also noteworthy that the pedobaptism practiced here is that of children whose parents are believers. In such cases there is an intentionality involved in the act that has something in common with the intentionality inherent in credobaptism. Christian parents or family members must answer questions concerning belief and behavior on behalf of the children. This is a different practice (and theology) than the baptism of all infants in a Christian society regardless of the lived faith and intentions of parents and sponsors.<sup>29</sup> And this refutes the historical claim often made by those who oppose infant baptism that pedobaptism began only after Constantine. Mass baptism of infants, however, did begin as the union of church and state fell into place in the second half of the fourth century. The resulting imposed conformity to the expectations of citizenship marginalized the faith and intention of the parents as an essential part of baptism. In the West its clinching arguments come from Augustine.

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catechesis into the fifth century. It is summarized in *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2013), 133-148.

26. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy*, 48.

27. *Ibid.*, 49.

28. *Ibid.*, 50.

29. *Ibid.*, 97. In the early-seventh-century Gelasian Sacramentary it is no longer the parents who respond but an acolyte.



### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FOURTH-CENTURY SHIFTS

One of the striking examples of the persistence of a rigorous adult catechumenate more than half a century after Constantine is found in the writings of John Chrysostom. Chrysostom was the bishop of Antioch and then the patriarch of Constantinople. His *Baptismal Instructions* consists of eight general addresses to his catechumens (23-130) and four addresses to them immediately preceding baptism (131-194).<sup>30</sup>

Chrysostom began the "First Instruction" by speaking in an extended, highly personal metaphor of the candidates' betrothal to Christ.<sup>31</sup> He urged them not to dwell "on the enormity of your evil" but on the "bounty of His grace."<sup>32</sup> He urged them to confess the trinitarian faith with confidence.<sup>33</sup> Then followed the first of several urgings to put on Christ and turn from evil behavior—oaths, entertainments, lavish dress.<sup>34</sup> The "Second Instruction" concerned "what is accomplished in a symbolic and figurative fashion in holy baptism." Catechumens should come forward for baptism "with great faith and full assurance."<sup>35</sup> In baptism, "through the words and hand of the priest the Holy Spirit descends upon you. Instead of the man who descended into water, a different man comes forth."<sup>36</sup> Then Chrysostom challenged the candidates: "As you come forth from the waters symbolizing your resurrection by rising up from them, ask Him to be your ally."<sup>37</sup> Finally, in the "Third Instruction," Chrysostom explained the "ten gifts of baptism." The first gift is the remission of sins. Since infants "are sinless" they need no remission of sin and can receive the other gifts of baptism, among them, "sanctification, justice, filial adoption, and inheritance."<sup>38</sup>

Three relevant issues stand out in the *Baptismal Instructions*, even if we can only note them in passing here. The first is that Chrysostom's sacramental language seems to be both realist (in the baptismal water the Spirit transforms the candidate) and figurative rather than literal. The second is that infants are sinless and do not need to have their sins remitted. This position, which became the norm for the established Eastern Church, contradicts Augustine's position, which determined the

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30. *St. John Chrysostom: Baptismal Instructions*, trans. Paul Harkins (New York: Newman, 1963). These discourses were spoken in Antioch about 390.

31. *Ibid.*, 23-30.

32. *Ibid.*, 30, 33-34.

33. *Ibid.*, 30-32, 46.

34. *Ibid.*, 39-42.

35. *Ibid.*, 43.

36. *Ibid.*, 52.

37. *Ibid.*, 54.

38. *Ibid.*, 57.

baptismal theology and practice of the established Western Church into the mid-twentieth century. The third issue is that baptism conveys nine other gifts that can be received by infants because no sin stands in their way. It is only because they are sinners, according to Chrysostom, that adults need baptism. In Chrysostom there are no preconditions for the baptism of an infant. Is one implication of these assertions that if all children of the church were baptized in infancy, baptism on confession of faith would have no place? Is another implication that faith on behalf of the infant is not required for it to receive God's grace?

Constantine and his successors' patronage of the Christian God brought with it preferential treatment of the church and its members in both the Eastern and Western parts of the empire. This change made it increasingly attractive to become a Christian, at least in the sense of conforming to Christian ritual. This vast and fascinating transition had direct consequences for developments in baptismal practice. On the one hand, with Chrysostom as the outstanding case in point, in many parts of the church there were movements to preserve the rigor of baptismal catechesis in order for believers to remain steadfast under persecution. This had been a central concern for the Donatists and Pelagians. On the other hand, some candidates and clergy increasingly pressed for a less demanding way to become a Christian. Ironically, one of the reasons for the delay of baptism until full adulthood or old age was to postpone the rigorous demands of membership. This in turn led to gradations in the rigor of catechesis.

Augustine stepped into this turbulent pastoral situation when he began his ministry as bishop of Hippo toward the end of the fourth century. Augustine's ecclesiology is the necessary frame of reference for his subsequent thinking on baptism. He was not a rigorist. In contrast to the Donatists, he had come to the conclusion that the visible church was a mixed multitude of believers and unbelievers.<sup>39</sup> This assumption lessened his concern to determine whether the confession of faith of each candidate had "integrity," to use the language of the *Apostolic Tradition*.<sup>40</sup> His predestinarian views allowed Augustine to leave such a determination up to God.

To put the influence of Augustine's thought into the briefest possible capsule, two of his innovations set the course of baptismal theology and

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39. Abraham Friesen lays out the contrast between Augustine and the Anabaptists.—*Reformers, Radicals, Revolutionaries: Anabaptism in the Context of the Reformation Conflict* (Elkhart, Ind.: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2012), 79-114.

40. William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechuminate* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1995), 113-120.

practice in Catholic and Protestant established churches ever since.<sup>41</sup> One of them was Augustine's anthropology — namely, his belief that infants are born not only with Adam's sin but also Adam's guilt. The second was his theology of sacraments, especially in relation to baptism. Sacraments, he argued, function *ex opere operato*, that is, they accomplish what they signify, independent of the moral character or the faith of the minister or the recipient.

How did these innovations take place? To counter what he considered false views of the church and human nature, Augustine took existing catholic tradition and expanded it into a comprehensive defense of infant baptism. Augustine's first accusation arose from the controversy between Donatists and Catholics. The former were concerned for the purity of the church. Thus, they practiced re-baptism on people who had defected from their faith during persecution.

Augustine argued that someone who has been baptized with water in the name of the Trinity is marked by that act for life: she cannot lose the grace she received, even through grievous sin. Similarly, and related, the baptisms conferred by a presbyter who is morally unworthy still confer the grace that the sacrament unfailingly conveys. Augustine concluded that baptism cannot be called into question by either the person baptized or the one baptizing.<sup>42</sup> In order to do so he developed the claim that a sacrament is always "valid" if it is properly performed—that is, with water in the name of the Trinity. Baptism makes an indelible mark on the person's soul so that she belongs to Christ. However, the sacrament is not "fruitful" for discipleship unless it is received in faith.

This difference between "validity" and "fruitfulness" is hard to grasp for people outside baptismal traditions that stem from Augustine. They fear that in church history the term "valid" has been interpreted by some clergy and laity alike in such a way, that if you are properly (i.e., validly) baptized you are "safe" regardless of the life you lead.<sup>43</sup>

Augustine's second defining controversy concerning baptism arose from his debate with Pelagius, the British missionary who had come to Africa. What we gather from fragments of his writings, which were largely destroyed by his detractors, is that Pelagius believed that humanity had never lost its identity as being in the image of God and that its sin

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41. By the term "innovations" I am not implying that there was not previous thinking in the direction Augustine took. There was. One thinks of Cyprian's teaching on original sin. But Augustine's thinking was innovative in that he created a novel and comprehensive baptismal doctrine whose foundation was his understanding of sin and sacrament.

42. "On Baptism: Against the Donatists," in *An Augustine Reader*, ed. J. O'Meara (Garden City, N.Y.: Image, 1973), 206-211.

43. As we will see later in the essay, this popular assumption was challenged by the Lutheran and Catholic partners in the recent Trilateral Dialogue on Baptism.

consisted not of an underlying condition but of deliberate human acts of evil. Pelagius was not opposed to infant baptism but saw it, as did the Eastern Church, as the gift of illumination; it was not necessary for salvation from sin.<sup>44</sup>

Augustine's retort arose out of his sense of the tragedy of human nature. Because of Adam's sin, Augustine insisted, we are all sinners and guilty even for the sin we inherit. To clinch his argument, Augustine presented an exegesis of Romans 5. Bible scholars today translate the pivotal verse 12 as "because all have sinned." Augustine relied on the Latin mistranslation "in whom [i.e., Adam] all have sinned."<sup>45</sup> Because all have sinned, only baptism could save newborns from condemnation, even though they could not receive baptism in any measurable way by a personal act of faith. Augustine's teaching gave the practice of infant baptism in the West a theological coherence it had lacked until then. Quite practically, he argued that all children born within the Christian social order had to be baptized, even if it required coercion. He concluded, "The sacrament of baptism is one thing, the conversion of the heart is another; but man's salvation is made complete through the two together."<sup>46</sup> It is not clear in his writings how he held those two claims together.

To outsiders of this way of thinking, it seems that the infant baptism of whole populations, as understood by Augustine and church teaching built on his views, underscores the "sacramental minimalism"<sup>47</sup> of his views. Although he speaks of "conversion of heart," when all is said and done, salvation from hell is achieved in baptism alone.<sup>48</sup> With Augustine's teaching the logic of infant baptism for a mass church, whether of a child of believing parents or not, gradually displaced the logic of baptism on confession of faith as the norm of the Western church.

This terse summary of fourth-century developments in baptismal theology and practice in the West remains incomplete without reference to simultaneous developments in the East. It is clear, for example, that Gregory Nazianzus, Cyril of Jerusalem, and John Chrysostom more clearly taught and expected an interior transformation of the candidate in conversion and baptism than did their Western counterparts. They expected the new Christian to share experientially in union with Christ

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44. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Christian Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 1:308-318.

45. Augustine, "The Grace of Christ and Original Sin," in O'Meara, *An Augustine Reader*, 476.

46. Augustine, "On Baptism," iv, 25.

47. Johnson, *Living Water*, 189, 200.

48. O'Meara, *An Augustine Reader*, 461-464.

and the gifts of the Spirit.<sup>49</sup> At the same time Theodore of Mopsuestia and Cyril of Jerusalem both argued, against the assumptions of some of their flock, that these rights are not “magical.”<sup>50</sup> The implication in the forcefulness of their argument is that they are protesting a waning of this existential piety in the church of their day. It is worth remembering that this waning also prompted an upsurge in monastic vocations, where the earlier belief in covenantal baptism and community lived on.

None of these protests was able to forestall the consequences of a mass church in the East, in which all the citizens of the empire were enrolled. That this same development became the rule in the West is evident in the Gelasian Sacramentary from the early seventh century. In it infant baptism as the universal rite of initiation into church and empire was the norm.<sup>51</sup>

In surveying these developments one could make the case that a shift in ecclesiology preceded and made necessary a shift in baptism. The initial evidence for infant and children’s baptism in documents like the *Apostolic Tradition* seem to be a pastoral accommodation to the wishes of Christian parents in a believing church. But when the church became coterminous with the empire a form of infant baptism was needed that saved (in the West) or sanctified (in the East) a child without regard for the faith of the parents or the gathered congregation. This is the theology of baptism and the church that the sixteenth century inherited and from which the Anabaptists dissented.

Aiden Kavanaugh summarizes the complete shift to infant baptism and the end of formal preparation for baptism:

Thus the ancient catechumenate never died: it was rather transferred into religious houses, becoming the novitiate, and later a seminary education. By the same token, religious vows and priestly ordination took on much of the aura once possessed by baptism.<sup>52</sup>

In his *Discourses* for monks Philoxenus of Mabbug, a contemporary of Chrysostom and Augustine, warned his hearers that the mystery of life in the Spirit was not necessarily received in infant baptism. For some this came when they were of age. Entering life in the Spirit, that is, entering monastic life, happened as a second baptism, in the Spirit.<sup>53</sup>

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49. Johnson, *Living Water*, 121-124; K. McDonnell and G. Montague, *Christian Initiation and Baptism in the Holy Spirit* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1994), 226-288.

50. Hugh Riley, *Christian Initiation* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 1974), 185-197.

51. *Book I: 30-44* in Finn, *Early Christian Baptism: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt*, 92-107. For example, it is no longer the parents of each child that answer for it in repeating the Nicene Creed but a single acolyte who does that for each child (6-99).

52. Johnson, *Living Water*, 4.

53. McDonnell, *Christian Initiation*, 308-313.

Thus, the case can be made from these samples of a larger literature that monasticism was both an implicit and explicit judgment on the ecclesiology and baptism of the imperial church.

In the preceding section we have traced the evolution of baptismal theology and practice in the patristic church by means of representative samples of catechetical and liturgical documents. Three factors have stood out. One is the rigor with which baptismal candidates were catechized until late in the fourth century and beyond. The second outstanding factor is that already at the beginning of the third century a place was made for the baptism of infants and children of believers alongside adult candidates who had given evidence of an owned faith and discipleship. The third factor is that the end of the fourth to the end of the fifth centuries marked a turning point from the baptism of adult believers and their children to the pedobaptism of the whole population as the norm. Decisive in that development was the increasing prominence of the church in public life as well as Augustine's theology of baptism for a mass church.

#### ANABAPTISM: REVISITING DIVINE INITIATIVE AND HUMAN RESPONSE

With the coming of the Reformation, the most revolutionary criticism the Anabaptists made of the sixteenth-century Catholic Church—and later of magisterial Protestant churches—was its ecclesiology. At the heart of this critique was the role of sacraments in a church that included all members of society. For the radicals the church was a “called out” people rather than the whole population. It was to be a charismatic community rather than a hierarchical order, a priesthood of all believers who exercised gifts of the Spirit. Its expectation of members was similar to that of the early patristic era and of the monasticism that arose to protest the gradual erosion of a pure church. Leading Anabaptists reclaimed the threefold baptism of the early church—Spirit, water, and blood.<sup>54</sup> This stance is evident in the earliest Anabaptist confession of faith, the Schleitheim Articles.

Baptism should be given to all who have learned repentance, amendment of life, and faith through the truth that their sin has been removed by Christ; to all who want to walk in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and be buried with him in death so that they can be

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54. *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, trans. and ed. H. Wayne Pipkin and John H. Yoder (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1989), 189.

resurrected with him; and to all who desire baptism in this sense from us and who themselves request it.<sup>55</sup>

The experience of Anabaptists in the Catholic Church of their upbringing was that many people believed they were saved simply because their baptism had taken place. The initial protest of the radicals against the baptism in infancy of whole populations was not so much theological as moral.<sup>56</sup> They charged that the “obedience of faith” (Rom. 16:26) was not evident in the lives of many of the baptized. The corrective Anabaptism sought to bring to the moral life of the church was to emphasize that the gift of saving grace was transformative only when it was received in faith and love. As a result they regarded the New Testament references to baptism in a different light. What stood out to the radicals in the Gospels, Acts, and Paul’s epistles was the human response of faith and repentance.

... the people were moved to the recognition of their sin. And by that they also heard how Christ had suffered for them, that he paid for them and gave satisfaction for them on the cross. That again gives joy to people, enlivens the sinner, and brings him on the right path, so that he places his faith, hope, and love in God and trusts him for all good, through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>57</sup>

In theological language, they described the work of God’s Word and Spirit in drawing us to God as an “inward baptism” through which sinners are led to truth, obedience, and “the fire of love.” This transformation, in turn, led them to the outward baptism of water, which enacts the human response to divine grace.<sup>58</sup>

This corrective was the cutting edge, the “major key” of Anabaptist missionizing and theologizing. At the same time, when the radicals were writing pastorally to their flocks and not apologetically to their opponents, there is a “minor key” that also had a place in their writing. Even theologians like Menno Simons and Balthasar Hubmaier, who champion the corrective, have another side to them. They quoted and applied New Testament texts that portray God as an actor in baptism without qualification—that is, without suggesting that their use of language is metaphorical.<sup>59</sup> There is at least a thread of similarity between this and

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55. “Schleitheim Articles of 1527,” in *The Radical Reformation*, ed. Michael Baylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 174.

56. *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. J. C. Wenger (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1956), 239-242; *Hubmaier*, 196-199; *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, ed. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1978), 197-215.

57. Pipkin and Yoder, *Balthasar Hubmaier*, 115.

58. Wenger, *Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 246.

59. *Ibid.*, 249, 259, 265.

Chrysostom's at once realist and figurative sacramental language. In addition, once the polemics about a response of faith and obedience were over, several Anabaptists made room for the Spirit working through the church and the believer as the performer of baptism.<sup>60</sup>

It was Pilgram Marpeck who grounded this "minor key" in Anabaptist understandings of baptism in God's triune nature and the Word becoming flesh (Jn. 1:14). Marpeck derived the church's sacramental character from the incarnation: the church is the extension of the body of Christ's humanity in history. In his correspondence with Helene Streicher, a Spiritualist leader, Marpeck made his sacramental case:

We must use the elemental voice, and other such material things as long as we dwell in the flesh. . . . But where the Holy Spirit moves and creates life there, too, the same physical reality becomes Spirit and life.<sup>61</sup>

This means that inner and outer cannot be separated: God acts in both of them and we respond in both of them.<sup>62</sup> For Marpeck, the outward event is one with the inward event so that baptism with water is a *recapitulation* or even an *actualization* of baptism in the Spirit. The implication of this is that water baptism administered with integrity is, in fact, Spirit baptism.

This secondary strain of baptismal thought suggests that parts of the Anabaptist movement carried the seed of self-correction to its initial radical corrective. The initial corrective was to restore the necessity of the human response to the divine initiative, which they believed was its New Testament place in baptism. The "seed" of a second corrective was the incarnational notion that God is at work inseparably inwardly (Spirit) and outwardly (Son).<sup>63</sup>

Holding divine initiative and human response together has been a delicate balancing act throughout church history. If the imbalance in the pedobaptist position on baptism was to come down mostly on the side of divine initiative, the imbalance in the credobaptist position was to come down mostly on the side of human response. I have tried to show that the point of catechesis in the first centuries of the church was to elicit and form the new believer in responding to God's grace. *Ex opere operato* sacraments emerged initially to challenge subjective qualifiers to the effect of a sacrament and ultimately to provide ritual structure for a mass church. It

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60. Pipkin and Yoder, *Balthasar Hubmaier*, 117, 133, 351, 389.

61. "To Helene Streicher," in Klassen and Klaassen, *Writings*, 379.

62. *Later Writings by Pilgrim Marpeck and His Circle: The Expose, a Dialogue, and Marpeck's Response to Caspar Schwenckfeld*, trans. Walter Klaassen, John Rempel, and Werner O. Packull (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, 1999), 76-82.

63. Wenger, *Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 194-197, 225-232.



was this later theology and practice that Protestantism, and especially Anabaptism, condemned, not that of the early patristic church.<sup>64</sup>

What evidence is there for catechesis, or at least preparation for baptism, in sixteenth-century radicalism?<sup>65</sup> On the one hand, in the upheavals of the time, people's experience of God's saving presence in their life was often dramatic and charismatic, and frequently associated with an intense desire to know the Bible and to measure oneself by it. At the same time, a need was soon expressed for structured guidance for new believers. Hubmaier wrote several instructional materials, especially, *A Christian Catechism*.<sup>66</sup> Marpeck often made excurses in his writings that seem to be aimed at new Christians. This is particularly the case with his long pastoral letter, "Concerning Hasty Judgments and Verdicts." In it he cautions against premature self-judgment or judgment of others, reviews the meaning of baptism, warns against legalism, and teaches the Ten Commandments.<sup>67</sup>

A final belief concerning baptism is noteworthy. Anabaptists accepted the teaching of original sin but rejected the biologic transmission of sin. Further, they believed that Christ's reconciliation included children. Neither sin nor guilt counted until the child had come of age.<sup>68</sup> This notion freed the Anabaptists and their descendants from the dread that unbaptized infants would not be saved. This shift in perspective prodded them to look at New Testament baptismal references in a profoundly different light.<sup>69</sup>

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64. The section on baptism (2-9) in the groundbreaking statement *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* straightforwardly addresses the relationship between grace and faith in a sacrament (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).

65. Denis Jantz, in *A Reformation Reader* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), has assembled an array of catechetical materials from late medieval through all the streams of reform, including Anabaptism (pp. 200-243) and the Council of Trent.

66. Pipkin and Yoder, *Balthasar Hubmaier*, 339-365.

67. *Joerg Maler's Kunstbuch*, ed. John Rempel (Kitchener, Ont: Pandora Press, 2010), 137-192. It is noteworthy that in this same volume a widely used instruction on the meaning of baptism by the Anabaptist mystic Hans Hut is included.—"The Beginning of a True Christian Life," 115-136.

68. Wenger, *Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, 127-133.

69. *Ibid.*, 203-222, 235-259.

RECONSIDERATIONS:  
THE CASE OF THE TRILATERAL DIALOGUE ON BAPTISM  
(LUTHERAN, CATHOLIC, MENNONITE) 2012-2017

In 2012, in the wake of various recent reconciliation processes between Mennonites and Lutherans<sup>70</sup> and Mennonites and Catholics,<sup>71</sup> these three groups agreed to revisit the age-old and painful question of the mutual acceptance of one another's baptism. In an informal way the Mennonite Church, the oldest Free Church, represented concerns it has historically shared with other Free Churches, and specifically, with Believers' Churches.<sup>72</sup>

A careful examination of the whole dialogue process exceeds the boundaries of this article. Here I will only draw attention to three noteworthy breakthroughs. The first concerned significant agreement on the nature of salvation. We are saved by grace through faith, not our own doing (Eph. 2:8-10). In being saved we belong inseparably to Christ and to the body of Christ. The second breakthrough in the dialogue flows from a crucial aspect of the first—that is, the notion that parents and the congregation believe on behalf of the child being baptized. A third breakthrough for me personally was a shift in my historical awareness. Today there is a growing view among historians that pedobaptism and credobaptism were practiced side by side for much longer than has been commonly assumed. Reference to these three realities occurred throughout the dialogue.

Concerning agreement on the nature of salvation, "Catholics, Lutherans, and Mennonites agree that sin can only be overcome by grace, by the divine initiative, by the Holy Spirit."<sup>73</sup> The dialogue process was honest about differing emphases, such as the Lutheran conviction about our utter passivity in relation to salvation, and the Catholic and

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70. Dialogues were held in West Germany in the mid-1980s (German Mennonite Conference), thereafter in France (French Mennonite Conference), after the turn of the century in the United States (Mennonite Church USA) and then Canada (Mennonite Church Canada). In 2010 the Lutheran World Federation offered a public apology to the Mennonite World Conference for the persecution of Mennonites.

71. Arising partly out of on-the-ground collaboration between Catholic and Mennonite peace and justice programs, the Pontifical Council on Christian Unity of the Vatican and the Mennonite World Conference began a five-year process called the Healing of Memories in 1998. In 2003 it issued *Called Together to Be Peacemakers*.

72. Historically all Free Churches are "free" of state control and do not include all members of society. Some of them baptize infants. Today all churches in Canada and the United States as well as most churches in the Global South fit this category. Believers' churches have an additional common trait, that of baptizing people only on confession of faith.

73. *Trilateral Dialogue on Baptism*, text of May 2018 [hereafter cited as *Trilateral*], #45, 24.

Mennonite understanding that enough of God's image remains in us that we can respond to Christ.

In all three communions baptism "enacts" both the divine initiative and the human response—Spirit and water are its core elements. The believer is baptized into Christ and his body; baptism is inseparably personal and communal. It is sealed with the trinitarian formula.<sup>74</sup> Baptism is not an isolated event but the beginning of a life of discipleship.<sup>75</sup>

Beyond these agreements longstanding differences were also articulated. For Mennonites the starting point for a theology of baptism is the examples and commands in the New Testament, such as Matthew 28 and Mark 16. For Catholics and Lutherans the starting point is the New Testament's offer of universal grace.<sup>76</sup> For Catholics and Lutherans Spirit and water baptism are not sequential but simultaneous. It is God's saving initiative in baptism that brings the candidate into a relationship with Christ and his body. The gift of salvation does not depend on the candidate's response of faith. At the same time, in current Lutheran and Catholic theology and practice, there is greater clarity that this gift is received on behalf of the child by believing parents and the gathered congregation.<sup>77</sup>

Theoretically, all three churches believe that baptism cannot be repeated. Yet historically, all of them have baptized those seeking membership a second time because they concluded that the first ritual was not a true baptism. This problem has been thorniest for Mennonites because it entails the nature of baptism and not only its form. Today, Lutherans and Catholics agree that, at its core, a true baptism is one that intends what the church teaches—i.e., calling on the Spirit to make the water applied to the person the medium of regeneration, sealing the action with an invocation of the Trinity. "For Lutherans, to re-baptize would amount to distrust in God's promise that he has accepted the baptized into communion with him, which would make God a liar and not trustworthy."<sup>78</sup>

This is the painful point at which the three communions differ. The core Mennonite conviction remains that God's saving grace in conversion and baptism is fruitful only when it is received by the faith of the person being baptized. However, some ground was gained in the old disagreement between "sacrament" and "ordinance" when the Mennonite delegation

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74. *Ibid.*, #46, 26-27.

75. *Ibid.*, #53, 29.

76. *Ibid.*, #58, 31-33.

77. *Ibid.*, #71, 41.

78. *Ibid.*, #65, 36.

was able to make the simple affirmation that God is at work in baptism.<sup>79</sup> At issue here is how one understands a “symbol.” A number of Lutheran and Catholic representatives came to the table with the impression that all Mennonite and other Believers’ Churches held to the reductionist notion that an ordinance is a “mere symbol.” This language has come to the fore historically in polemical settings where Anabaptist and other Free Church and evangelical apologists did everything possible to distance themselves from a high sacramentology. Yet in other settings, from the sixteenth to the twenty-first centuries, Mennonites have spoken and acted as if the symbol participates in the reality it represents, as has been noted above in the “corrective of the corrective.”

The “most obvious contrast” among our communities was how we conceive of the relationship between baptism and faith.<sup>80</sup> Lutherans and Catholics would say that since we have all been born with a fallen human nature we need to be born again as soon as we come into this world. God provides for the new birth through baptism, which is received for the child by the parents and church, and must later be owned by the child in confirmation.<sup>81</sup>

It was not the intention of Lutherans and Catholics to dissuade Mennonites from their baptismal theology. What they asked of them was a willingness to look again as to whether Mennonites might recognize the integrity of the theology and practice of infant baptism on the basis of the sacramental dynamic described above.

The concern of Lutherans and Catholics about the primacy of God’s grace and the call to a lifelong response and participation in the life of the community has prompted them to affirm not only the possibility but the appropriateness of baptizing also infants. Might not Lutherans and Catholics acknowledge the decision of parents to foster a mature faith in their children prior to the request for baptism, that has determined Mennonite practice, as an authentic approach to Christian initiation? Might not Mennonites acknowledge that, given an assurance of familial and congregational commitment to provide formation in faith and discipleship, the choice of parents to request baptism for their young children, as practiced by Lutherans and Catholics, is an authentic approach to Christian initiation?<sup>82</sup>

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79. *Ibid.*, #66, 37-38. This had already been said in *Called to Be Peacemakers*, #123.

80. *Ibid.*, #71, 40-41.

81. *Ibid.*, #71-74, 41-45. The concern for the fallenness of the child is, as we saw in part one of this paper with reference to Chrysostom, a conviction of the Western Church and its theology of baptism. It is not a universal Christian teaching.

82. *Ibid.*, #75, 45.

By “authentic approach” the text means one “based on mutually recognizable Biblical concepts of grace, faith, and church as they have been interpreted by each of the three communions.”<sup>83</sup>

The second breakthrough of the dialogue—the notion that parents and the congregation believe on behalf of the child being baptized and form it in the Christian way—was especially important for the cogency of the Catholic and Lutheran argument. They addressed the Free Church concern about the baptism of whole populations self-critically and directly.<sup>84</sup> It was they who used the term “indiscriminate baptism”<sup>85</sup> to describe the initiation of infants without the condition of the personal faith of parents and of their promise to raise the child in a Christian way.<sup>86</sup> This self-criticism left a very positive impression on the Mennonite delegation because of its intentionality—that is, requesting baptism out of conviction rather than out of custom, and consciously nurturing the child through practices like church attendance, Bible reading, and prayer.

The context for this most difficult part of the dialogue should be noted. One was what Free Churches might call “the evangelical dimension” of faith. All the delegations placed as much emphasis on faith as *trust* in Christ as a presence in the believer’s life as they did on faith as *assent* to church teaching. The second dimension was the role of discipleship. Conversion and baptism lead to ongoing transformation. All of chapter 3 in the dialogue report, filled with biblical references, was devoted to the topic. Lutheran use of the admonition “remember your baptism” found particular resonance. By this they mean that baptism is not an isolated event but a moment that is to be lived lifelong.<sup>87</sup>

The dialogues resulted in several specific outcomes. Each of the delegations offered several pages of substantive and self-critical reflections on the baptism agenda and its contexts.<sup>88</sup> Of most direct relevance to this article was the Mennonite proposal to its sponsoring body, the Mennonite World Conference. Among other things, it asks Mennonite World Conference member churches to consider the following:

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83. *Ibid.*, #75, 46.

84. *Ibid.*, #76, 47. In the first two meetings a Lutheran member made the case for “folk baptism” (all who ask for it without regard for evidence of personal faith). A Catholic member made the case that in a Christianized society the church rightly baptizes all children. These views receded as the dialogue proceeded, as is evident above.

85. I first encountered this term in Colin Buchanan, *Baptismal Discipline* (Bramcote Notts, UK: Grove, 1974), 10-16.

86. In response to this candor the Mennonite delegation acknowledged that, contrary to their ecclesiology of a pure church, indiscriminate baptism has also been practiced in mainstream and old order Mennonite settings (#77).

87. *Ibid.*, #80-81, 49-52.

88. *Ibid.*, #107-120, 70-81.

“receiving members from infant baptism churches on the basis of their confession of faith,” “honouring the nurture candidates received toward Christ in their church of origin,” asking all members to affirm the Mennonite interpretation and practice of baptism while respecting churches that differ from us on these matters as brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>89</sup>

### CONCLUDING QUESTIONS

Is it theologically (and psychologically) possible to do what the Mennonite delegation proposes to do with integrity—that is, to accept a believer from a pedobaptist denomination asking for membership in a Mennonite congregation on the basis of a confession of faith while remaining convinced that the teaching and practice of the New Testament church was credobaptist?<sup>90</sup>

Two different theologies of infant baptism solidified at the end of the fourth century. In the Eastern Church infants were baptized because they were deemed *sinless* and had no need of repentance. In the Western Church infants were baptized because they were deemed *sinner*s and in danger of damnation. It would be of enormous help to Believers Churches if the established Western and Eastern Churches could make the significance of this difference clear to other communions. Is the difference as complete as it sounds to the lean Protestant ear?<sup>91</sup> Might such a conversation create space for rethinking the centuries-old debates on baptism as a whole?

Another significant question arises from a realization that remained on the margins of the trilateral dialogue. It concerns a shift in my historical awareness. The first section of this paper documented both the steady growth in infant baptism in the third and fourth centuries as well as increased rigor in some settings to the catechesis before believers' baptism.<sup>92</sup> Recent research has suggested that the Christian church practiced pedobaptism and credobaptism side by side for longer than has

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89. *Ibid.*, #113, 73. Kevin Roy, a Baptist theologian, expands on this notion.—*Baptism, Reconciliation and Unity* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 1997), 87-104.

90. There have been earlier attempts to do so, such as the Disciples of Christ in the decades after their nineteenth-century formation and the British Baptists in the course of the twentieth century. A different but related decision was made by the Church of South India (upon the union of pedo and credo baptist denominations in the 1940s) and the Berlin-Brandenburg Province (a Lutheran-Reformed union) of the Evangelical Church in Germany offering parents either infant baptism or a blessing with the offer of confirmation or credobaptism upon the confession of an owned faith.

91. David Wright, *Infant Baptism in Historical Perspective* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2007), 81-86.

92. *Ibid.*, 72. Alan Kreider's research has done much to change that stereotype.

been commonly assumed. The ongoing practice of two forms of baptism is suggested both by liturgical documents as well as by architecture.<sup>93</sup> In addition, there is evidence of missionary theologies of baptism during Charlemagne's reign, around 800, where biblical images, a reliance on preaching and teaching (and ultimately coercion), and a sense of personal conversion suggest an ongoing tradition of credobaptist theologizing.<sup>94</sup>

Might this evidence of a continuing practice of baptism on confession of faith into the Middle Ages have lessons to teach Eurocentric dialogues on baptism like this trilateral dialogue, situated in the post-Christendom conditions in the North Atlantic world, as well as to pedobaptist and credobaptist churches in the Global South?

The records of baptism in the New Testament are not uniform but they have significant commonality. Anabaptism as a broad movement believed that through the Holy Spirit the church in the sixteenth century could model itself on the church of the first century. In the end, the earliest patterns of church life were only incompletely restored in the sixteenth century. In turn, Anabaptist practices, which were also not uniform but had significant commonality, were only incompletely carried on in modern Mennonitism. It is in the nature of historical existence that one era cannot wholly replicate another one because its understanding is shaped by a new context.

In the Reformation the attempt by both magisterial and radical Protestant movements to reach back behind contemporary baptismal theology and practice not only drew on ancient concepts but also more recent ones that had arisen at the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>95</sup> In essence, late medieval mysticism was an elevation of the inward aspect of faith and spirituality above their outward forms. Spiritualists, theologians in the Reformed Church, like Zwingli (the most influential orthodox "rationalist" in the first wave of Reformation), and Anabaptists alike all used this separation of inner and outer positively as a way of reclaiming the evangelical dimension of faith as the norm for every believer. By the Spirit, Christ indwelt every Christian, as in Galatians 2:20: "I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me." But in the process of regaining the experience of faith there was also a negative consequence—the danger of losing the oneness of inner and outer, the single reality of God's saving work.

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93. See Fuerst, *Die Liturgie der alten Kirche*.

94. Alcuin of York is foremost among them.—Owen Phelen, *The Formation of Christian Europe: The Carolingians, Baptism, and the Imperium Christianum* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 94-146.

95. Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2012), 299-365.

In a related way, one crucial part of the Protestant context, including Anabaptism, was the accusation that “magic”—the power of holy objects to manipulate spiritual reality—was one of the corruptions of the Catholic worldview. By means of a complex dynamic unleashed in the sixteenth century, non-Lutheran Protestant arguments arrived at a reading of the New Testament that became the first step toward the disenchantment of the cosmos.<sup>96</sup>

Our interest lies in how these developments affected the Anabaptist understanding of sacraments. The incarnational belief in God’s use of the material world to mediate the spiritual one was damaged, sometimes to the point of breaking. One way of replacing the enchanted understanding of sacraments (and of the world) was a new understanding of symbolism in which matter was “merely” an outward sign of an inward reality. This was not the only Anabaptist and Reformed understanding, but it ended up as the one that most shaped how later generations of these movements read the New Testament and the apostolic church.

At a crucial point in the radical re-appropriation of the Gospel this newly-held set of attitudes misread the New Testament mindset.<sup>97</sup> First of all, in the frame of reference of the early church inner and outer, body and soul, were not regarded in a self-conscious, rationalized way as separate entities. Conversion and baptism—or Spirit baptism and water baptism, if you wish—were not separate entities but a single reality, even though they most often happened sequentially.

The imposition of an emerging modern reading of sacramentality was carried forward by renewal movements that came after Anabaptism, like Pietism, Baptists, Quakers, Methodism, Church of the Brethren. The pervasive influence of the Enlightenment, even in circles that did not subscribe to it, intensified inwardness and experience.<sup>98</sup> The attempt of science to banish religion from the material world devalued what was outward about religion, that is, its morality and its ritual life. This complex of intellectual developments became useful to European renewal movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in their quite different reasons for locating the divine initiative in the inward realm and human response in the outward one. This way of thinking was the ultimate outcome of the novel early modern deduction that a symbol is

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96. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 2007), 71-84.

97. See the pioneering exegesis of foundational passages such as Rom. 6 in Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), 127-145.

98. Michael Driedger succinctly lays out Mennonite engagement with the Enlightenment in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Netherlands.—“Aufklärung,” [www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=top:aufklaerung](http://www.mennlex.de/doku.php?id=top:aufklaerung) Mennonitisches Lexikon V, ed., Hans-Juergen Goertz. An unpublished version of this text in English is available from the author.



“merely” an outward sign of an inward reality rather than a living sign that participates in the reality it signifies as part of the oneness of reality.

Therefore, it is not possible to say without careful qualification that believers’ baptism, as it is popularly thought of in Eurocentric circles, is the baptism of the New Testament. Present-day theologians and ministers in Free Churches in the North Atlantic world are grappling with this realization.<sup>99</sup> Churches native to the Global South, and streams of church life in North America—black, Hispanic, indigenous, Asian—to the extent that they have not taken on the bifurcation of the material and spiritual worlds from European thought, have never left the enchanted world in which spirit and matter belong to a single reality. To my knowledge, this conversation between the two worldviews within the same church has not yet begun.

Unless credobaptist churches reclaim what might be called “New Testament baptismal realism” they will fall short of the meaning of the biblical texts, the incarnation, and the baptismal practice of the early church. Pedobaptist churches, by and large, have retained a stronger doctrine of the incarnation. At the same time, it is with some justification that credobaptist churches have argued that historically established churches have compromised their own heritage by the indiscriminate application of the incarnational principle, for example, in the union of church and state.

I am not arguing that we should—or can—replicate the mental attitude of the early church, as mirrored especially in the New Testament. Yet that does not discount it as our norm. What I am arguing for is an increased awareness that we have read the New Testament baptismal references through sixteenth- and eighteenth-century eyes. A self-critical reading of these texts and their contexts suggest that we are on solid ground in claiming that divine initiative and the response of the human subject being addressed are held together in the conversion and baptism accounts at stake. A self-critical reading of the sacramental nature of these accounts, on the other hand, suggests to me that we have imposed an alien interpretation on them. If Free Churches become more self-critical about these matters the debate over baptism will be able to move to a further stage of reconciliation. Perhaps if Free Churches do so, they will have gained the integrity to challenge the Christendom assumptions that still largely govern baptismal theology and practice in established churches in both East and West.

I suggest two starting points for that agenda. One of them is that Augustine’s theology of baptism and the church is so exclusively tied to

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99. Anthony Cross and Philip Thompson, *Baptist Sacramentalism* (Eugene Ore.: Wipf & Stock, 2008).

the Christendom model that it lacks integrity as the foundation for infant baptism in a post-Christendom world.

I also propose that pedobaptist and credobaptist traditions together return to a particular aspect of the development of the patristic church. I would call it the bone deep, lingering reluctance in many parts of the early medieval church to give up baptism on confession of faith. The most striking case in point for me is for how catechetical practice and liturgical form retained all the elements of adult baptism for many centuries even though all the candidates were infants. Free Churches might be tempted to conclude that, in the end, the church of that era feared tampering with something it had no right to change. Liturgical Churches might counter that at heart this practice showed that pedobaptism and credobaptism were the same rite.