

The Protestant Sacraments

an evangelical approach

by

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Preface

Among the oldest debates in Christendom are those concerning the meaning and practice of baptism and the Lord's table. While baptismal controversies arose within the ante-Nicene church, the modern baptismal controversies are more directly related to movements stemming from the Protestant Reformation. The same is true of the eucharistic controversies. The development of ideas concerning the Lord's table in the medieval period, especially the notion of transubstantiation, was rejected by the Reformers. Today, Christendom still remains divided over these fundamental issues.

Here, we hope to shed light on the nature of these controversies, examine the biblical and historical evidence, and reach some conclusions, while at the same time extending as much tolerance as possible toward Christians who see differently. May God enable us to keep the unity of the Spirit until we all come into the unity of the faith (Ep. 4:3, 13)!

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Christian Baptism

Water baptism has been an integral part of Christianity from the beginning. We know of no Christian in the New Testament who was not baptized, and while there are New Testament narratives where baptism is not specifically mentioned, there are strong reasons to believe that the converts received Christian baptism notwithstanding. There have been a few Christian groups who have dispensed with baptism as a superfluous ritual, as in ultra-dispensationalism which sees baptism as belonging to a past dispensation or as in the Society of Friends who prefer to say that there is a sacramental quality to all of life, but these groups are a decided minority. At the same time, Christian groups have divided over the particulars of baptism, such as mode, formula, age of the candidate, significance of the act, and so forth.

The Roots and Forerunners of Christian Baptism

Converts in the early Christian era would not have found the initiatory ritual of baptism to be unfamiliar. A variety of kinds of ritual washings are antecedent to the Christian faith.

Jewish Baptisms

In the first place, Old Testament ceremonial washings with water were common symbols of purification in the faith of Israel (Lv. 16:4, 24; 15:8; Nu. 19:7, 13, 18-22). It is not without significance that the Greek word *baptizein* (= to baptize) came to be used in Judaism to refer to washings from levitical impurities.¹ It is so used in Mk. 7:4 and underlies the English verb “to wash”. Also in this passage, the Greek noun *baptismos* (= baptisms) underlies the English rendering “washings”.

Most important, however, are the Jewish ritual immersion baths prior to and during the time of John the Baptist. Until relatively recently, our only knowledge

¹ A. Oepke, *TDNT* (1964) 1.535.

of these baths were in ancient literature, but archaeologists have uncovered a dozen or so dating to the second temple period. Called *miqva'ot* (singular, *mikveh*), these pools regularly feature two reservoirs for water connected to each other by a pipe. One pool was for the collection and storage of water, the other for the actual immersion. Some also include a third smaller pool for washing hands and feet before the actual immersion. This ritual bath was not hygienic but symbolic, representing ritual purification. It was required before entering the Temple facilities, before offering a sacrifice, and after acquiring ritual impurity (nocturnal emission, menstruation, sexual intercourse or contact with a corpse, cf. Lv. 15). According to rabbinical texts, complete immersion was required (performed naked unless one was unclean).²

There are some clear connections between these Jewish baptisms and later Christian baptism. For one thing, John the Baptist was a Jew (his father was even a priest), and it is unlikely that his ministry to Jews would have been very effective with the introduction of an unheralded ritual. Furthermore, John's practice of baptizing in the Jordan conformed to rabbinic law--that baptism must be in "living" (running) water,³ a stipulation that is repeated in early Christianity.⁴ At Pentecost, some 3000 received Christian baptism (Ac. 2:41), and since the descent of the Holy Spirit took place in the temple precincts (cf. Lk. 24:53; Ac. 2:1), the several *miqva'ot* associated with the temple would have been the likely place that these baptisms occurred.

Also to be considered are Jewish slave baptisms. Pagan slaves who entered a Jewish household were compelled to receive a baptism into the household, a baptism "in the name of slavery". Similarly, if they were emancipated, they were baptized "in the name of freedom".⁵ Jewish proselyte baptisms also occurred when a Gentile entered the circle of Judaism. The convert was required to offer sacrifice, to submit to circumcision, and to receive baptism.⁶ Baptisms occurred in the Qumran community, the sect famous for their preservation of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This Essene community, a reactionary sect who withdrew from Jewish society to live in the desert in order to await the destruction of the world, practiced a ritual baptism, not so much as an initiatory rite but as a periodic ritual cleansing, perhaps

² W. LaSor, "Discovering What Jewish Miqva'ot Can Tell Us About Christian Baptism," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1987), pp. 52-59. Some of the ancient pool installations are debated. Are they baptismal pools or some other type of reservoir, cf. R. Reich, "The Great Mikveh Debate," *BAR* (Mar/Apr 1993), pp. 52-53 and H. Eshel and E. Meyers, "The Pools of Sepphoris: Ritual Baths or Bathtubs?" *BAR* (Jul/Aug 2000), pp/ 42-49, 60-61. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that at least some of these pools are for ritual immersions.

³ *Mikva'ot* 5.5.

⁴ The preference for "living" (running) water in the *Didache* 7 likely is a reflection on earlier Jewish tradition.

⁵ G. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids:Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 90-91.

⁶ J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia Fortress, 1969), p. 320 and La Sor, p. 59..

reenacted each year.⁷

Hellenistic Baptisms

In addition to Jewish forms of baptism, there were baptisms in the pagan mysteries. The popular mystery religions in the Hellenistic world infrequently required sacred baths that symbolized spiritual purification and initiation into the cult.⁸ Thus, the idea of a ritual baptism was not unknown either to Jews or to pagans even prior to the time of John the Baptist and Jesus.

The Baptism of John the Baptizer

The baptisms administered by John the Baptist, he/she are even that much nearer the actual roots of Christian baptism. A direct link exists, because Jesus himself was baptized by John at the initiation of his own ministry (Mt. 3:13-16). Furthermore, it seems almost certain that Jesus' earliest disciples had been baptized by John, since they were John's disciples before they were Jesus' disciples (Jn. 1:35-42). Even after they began to follow him, some of Jesus' disciples continued to practice baptism, though this does not seem to have lasted long (Jn. 3:22-26; 4:1-2).⁹ That John baptized "where there was much water" (Jn. 3:23) suggests that he followed the common Jewish pattern of immersion. His baptisms even may have been considered sufficient for at least some Christians without rebaptism inasmuch as there is no record that either the apostles or Apollos were rebaptized, though admittedly the argument from silence cannot be pressed (cf. Ac. 2; 18:24-28). Also, at least one group of disciples who knew only John's baptism were rebaptized (Ac. 19:3-5). Still, the rebaptism of the apostles and/or Apollos is the sort of thing of which one might expect a record if indeed it happened. The difference may lie in Apollos' apparent devotion to Jesus toward whom John had pointed. The disciples at Ephesus, on the other hand, were possibly of a group who had gone no further in their devotion than the Baptist himself.¹⁰ Given this direct connection between John's baptism and the Christian baptism that followed, it will be well to look closely at John's baptism and what it signified.

⁷ W. LaSor, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1962), pp. 78-80.

⁸ T. Lindsey, *ISBE* (1979) 1.418-419. It may be noted that pagan baptisms were something less than true parallels to Christian baptism, but nevertheless, the similarity would have been apparent, cf. E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 239.

⁹ The singular verbs in 3:22, 26 imply that Jesus personally baptized, but the explanatory note in 4:2 suggests that his disciples did the actual ritual, though doubtless under the authority of Jesus.

¹⁰ See discussion in R. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981) IX.493.

Repentance and Forgiveness

John's baptism was first and foremost a baptism expressing repentance (Mt. 3:11; Ac. 13:24; 19:4), that is, it signified a deliberate change of mind and a desire for forgiveness (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3). It was not "baptism for the forgiveness of sins," but rather, "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mk. 1:4). It is unlikely that John conceived of baptism as an active means of forgiveness, but rather, as an outward rite that pointed toward forgiveness. Baptism was the ritual indication that a convert had repented and was looking to God for forgiveness.

Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that John's role was that of administering a sacrament, as though he personally was necessary as an active agent. In fact, assuming that John's baptism was patterned after the existing Jewish ritual, John may not have performed the act at all. Jewish baptisms required a witness, but the witness did not actually perform the baptism. Instead, the candidate immersed himself.¹¹ Hence, the New Testament expression "the baptism of John" may only mean that John served as the witness rather than the administrator.¹²

A Preparation for the Coming One

John's preaching anticipated the coming of Jesus who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:8; Lk. 3:16). The baptism with the Holy Spirit was, as we now know, fulfilled at Pentecost (Ac. 1:5; 2:1-4). However, the baptism of fire pointed toward God's judgment of the world (cf. Mt. 3:12; Lk. 3:7-9, 17; cf. Is. 4:4; 30:27-28, 33). John's baptism with water is set in deliberate contrast with what was to come so as to anticipate it. It was either "be baptized now and be forgiven" or "be baptized later and be consumed." If a listener was not prepared for the Spirit, he/she must be prepared for the judgment.

The Early Christian Practice and Significance of Baptism

For Christians, the central redemptive event of history is the death and resurrection of the Lord, Jesus Christ. It is to be expected that Christian baptism, the initiatory rite of entry into the Christian community, should be closely connected with this center of salvation-history.

John's Baptism of Jesus (Mt. 3:13-17//Mk. 1:9-11//Lk. 3:21-22)

Jesus' baptism is recorded by all three synoptic gospels. The fourth gospel, while it does not describe Jesus' baptism, assumes it (Jn. 1:32-34). Only one

¹¹ The expressions in the Mishnah, for instance, are *tabal* (= immersed himself) and *tabelu* (= immersed themselves), cf. *Mikva'ot* 2.1-2; 7.6.

¹² La Sor, *BAR*, p. 58.

gospel, however, specifically explains why Jesus was baptized, and in this explanation in Matthew, Jesus said, “It is thus fitting to us to fulfil all righteousness” (3:15). If the word “all” is here to be emphasized, it means that Jesus would be the one to effect a general forgiveness.¹³ He was not baptized for his own sins but as an act of solidarity with all the people and as a dedication to his task as the Servant-Messiah. It is surely more than incidental that the voice from heaven seems to echo the messianic statement in Psalm 2:7 (“You are my Son”) as well as the presentation of the Servant of the Lord in Isaiah 42:1 (“Here is my Servant”). That Jesus was baptized in view of his coming death is made even more explicit in that he uses the word baptism as a metaphor for his passion (Mk. 10:38; Lk. 12:50). Furthermore, it was probably at the time of Jesus’ baptism that John the Baptist identified his successor as “God’s Lamb who takes away the world’s sin” (Jn. 1:29). Thus, Jesus’ baptism was an act performed in anticipation of his coming sacrificial work.

The Great Commission (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:16)¹⁴

In Jesus’ final discourse to his followers, he indicated that the rite of baptism was to be resumed, a rite that had been suspended since the early days of his ministry.¹⁵ Here, the practice of baptism is connected with the making of disciples from all nations. Baptism was to be the act that expressed their faith and symbolized their entry into a new community under the name of God.

The Baptisms Recorded in the Early Church

It is probably right to assume that all early Christians were baptized, but the fact remains that the New Testament records only a few specific instances of baptism. In none of these is the actual baptismal event completely described with respect to the physical ritual. Hence, such lack of explanation suggests that Christian baptism was not substantially different than Jewish baptism that preceded it. The recorded instances are:

- 1) Converts at Pentecost (Ac. 2:41)
- 2) Converts at Samaria (Ac. 8:12-13)
- 3) The Ethiopian official (Ac. 8:36-39)

¹³ O. Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950) 18-19.

¹⁴ As is well known, Mark 16:9-20 is not in many of the earliest manuscripts, but since verse 16 seems generally corroborated by Matthew 28:19, which has solid credentials in the Greek text of the first gospel, we may safely dismiss any reservations about its traditional authenticity.

¹⁵ Of course, John 3:22-26 and 4:1-2 substantiate that early on, Jesus had his disciples administer baptism. However, the silence of anything beyond this seems sufficient to suggest that such a practice was temporary.

- 4) Paul (Ac. 9:18; 22:16)
- 5) Cornelius and his household (Ac. 10:47-48)
- 6) Lydia and her household (Ac. 16:14-15)
- 7) The Philippian jailer and his household (Ac. 16:33)
- 8) Crispus and his household, Stephanas and his household, and Gaius as well as others (Ac. 18:8; 1 Co. 1:13-16)
- 9) John's Ephesian disciples (Ac. 19:3-5)
- 10) The Romans (Ro. 6:3-4)
- 11) The Galatians (Ga. 3:27)

The Lukan Understanding of Baptism

Luke's understanding of salvation was rooted in the response of faith to the good news about Jesus. Again and again, Luke points to the act of believing the gospel as the way by which converts became part of the new Christian community.¹⁶ While he only specifically mentions baptism in about a third of these conversion descriptions, it is clear that he sees baptism as a sign pointing toward forgiveness and faith. The phrases he uses generally express both these ideas:

Forgiveness

- ♦ “repent and be baptized for forgiveness” (Ac. 2:38)
- ♦ “be baptized and wash your sins away” (Ac. 22:16)

Faith

- ♦ “when they believed....they were baptized” (Ac. 8:12-13)
- ♦ “why shouldn't I be baptized? If you believe you may” (Ac. 8:36-37)¹⁷
- ♦ “God opened Lydia's heart....and she was baptized (Ac. 16:14-15)
- ♦ “believe in the Lord Jesus Christ....immediately he and his family were baptized” (Ac. 16:31, 33)
- ♦ “and many believed and were baptized” (Ac. 18:8)
- ♦ “on hearing this, they were baptized” (Ac. 19:5)

¹⁶ Ac. 2:37, 38, 41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:7; 8:12-14, 36-37; 9:18, 35, 42; 10:43, 47-48; 11:1, 21; 13:12, 39, 43, 48; 14:1, 21-23, 27; 15:3, 7, 9, 11, 19; 16:14-15, 30-34; 17:4, 12, 30, 34; 18:4, 8, 27; 19:10, 18; 20:21; 21:20; 26:18, 20; 28:23-24.

¹⁷ While manuscript evidence is weak for 8:37, it is at least theologically sound, cf. I. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), p. 165.

Baptism, therefore, was an expression of the convert's faith, and at the same time, it represented God's forgiveness. Further, it indicated a solidarity among God's people who were united together in a common ritual.

The Pauline Understanding of Baptism

Paul extends the meaning of baptism even further. The rich nuances of meaning which he offers are given in several metaphors.

Baptism as a Representation of the Death, Burial, and Resurrection of Jesus (Ro. 6:3-5)

The context of this passage is Paul's answer to the question of whether grace trivializes sin. In order to show that the believer is to reject a life of sin, Paul appeals to baptism in order to illustrate that the new life in Jesus is to be different than the old life. Just as Jesus' resurrection marked the difference between his earthly life and his resurrection life, so baptism is the demarcation between the sinner's life of degeneracy and the convert's life of freedom from sin's mastery. Converts are "baptized into Christ's death," that is, they are identified with the death and burial of Christ by being submerged in the water. It is as though the convert is laid beside Christ Jesus in the tomb. Just as Christ emerged from the tomb, the baptismal candidate emerges from the water so that he or she may live anew in Christ. This way of putting it reminds one of Paul's description of the gospel as the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus (1 Co. 15:1-4). The symbolic act of baptism relates the believer to the atoning death of Jesus on the cross, to the power of Jesus' resurrection, and to the convert's own inward death to sin's mastery.

Baptism as the Symbol of Sonship in Christ (Ga. 3:26-28)

There are three ideas in these verses which, although related, are not synonymous. The first is the idea of sonship, that is, the special relationship one begins with God when he/she passes into God's intimate family by believing the gospel. One becomes a child of God by faith, and this transition is represented by baptism. Second, one is *eis Christon* (= in Christ), a status described as the "putting on" of Christ, similar to the putting on of clothing (the verb is *enduo* in the middle voice = "to wear" or "to clothe oneself"). This figure possibly is drawn from the changing of clothes for the baptismal rite.¹⁸ Just as one puts on a new change of clothes, he/she puts on a new life in Jesus Christ. Finally, the new sphere of

¹⁸ G. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 148-149.

existence “in Christ” is one without racial, social or gender prejudices. In God’s family there is true unity without acrimony. All three of these ideas--sonship, being “in Christ”, and the solidarity of believers--are represented by baptism.

Baptism as the Sign of the Circumcision of Christ (Col. 2:9-13)

In response to the Colossian heresy, the false notion that fullness of religious experience could not be achieved through Christ alone, Paul argued forcefully that there is complete fullness in Christ and his redemptive work. This is the thrust of his declaration, “...you have been given fullness in Christ...” (2:10). Paul then comments on this fullness with the analogy of Jewish circumcision.

Circumcision was the foundation ritual of Jewish covenant faith (cf. Ge. 17:9-14). It served as the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham and was performed on all males at eight days of age. It is likely that some in Colossae were urging Jewish circumcision as the path toward full religious privilege and experience. Paul rebuts this notion by arguing that in baptism Christians already have received circumcision spiritually.

Physical circumcision described in the Old Testament became a metaphor for spiritual circumcision, that is, the casting off of human weakness through the work of Christ. In one sense, the circumcision of Christ might refer to his death. Instead of stripping off a small portion of flesh, Jesus stripped off the entire body of flesh in death (*te apekdysi tou somatos tes sarkos* = the stripping off and/or casting away of the fleshly body).¹⁹ Just as Jesus died, was buried and arose, so the Colossians also had stripped off their dominating body of flesh by being buried and raised with Christ in baptism. Paul’s analogy, then, is as follows:²⁰

Circumcision of Christ = Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection

Circumcision of Christians = Believers’ identity with the atoning death, burial and resurrection of Christ in the act of baptism

Baptism as a Cleansing Bath

Paul also sees baptism as a cleansing bath. The phrases “you were washed” [*apolouo* = to wash oneself] (1 Co. 6:11), “the washing [*loutro* = bath] with

¹⁹ Translators and exegetes, when interpreting the phrase “the circumcision of Christ” (2:11), must decide between an objective genitive or a subjective genitive. If the former, the phrase refers to the circumcision done *to* Christ, that is, the stripping off and casting away of the flesh of Christ when he died on the cross, cf. R. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 82. If the latter, the phrase refers to the circumcision done *by* Christ (so NIV), i.e., the purification that Christ gives to others.

²⁰ Some understand baptism as the NT ritual replacement of OT circumcision. As such, baptism is the sign of the new covenant just as circumcision was the sign of the old covenant. Such an interpretation is possible, though not demanded by the text. If it is used, it must not be pressed too far, or it may result in a distortion of the gospel of grace.

water” (Ep. 5:26) and “the washing [*loutron*] of rebirth” (Tit. 3:5) almost certainly refer to baptism.²¹ As such, baptism marks the demarcation between the old life of corruption and the new life of holiness.

Other Pauline References

Besides the major passages discussed above, it bears mentioning that Paul apparently delegated the administration of baptism to his co-workers (cf. 1 Co. 1:14-17). That Paul did not see baptism as an automatic guarantee of salvation is clear from his analogy of baptism and the Red Sea crossing (cf. 1 Co. 10:1-6, 11-12). Those who were baptized “in the cloud and in the sea” later perished in the desert. Nevertheless, neither of these passages should lead us to conclude that baptism was a matter to which Paul was indifferent. For him baptism was included as one of the great unifying factors of Christian faith (Ep. 4:5). His use of the inclusive phrases “*all* of us” and “*we*” (Ro. 6:3), and the phrases “you are *all* sons” and “*all* of you” (Gal. 3:26-27) when discussing baptism seem to indicate clearly that Paul did not envision such a thing as an unbaptized Christian.

Paul's Disclaimer

In addition to Paul's theological explanations of the meaning of baptism, it should also be pointed out that he specifically disclaimed that his primary focus in missions work was baptism (1 Co. 1:13-17). His concern, of course, was that some members of the Corinthian church were polarized over personalities. Perhaps some Christians might unduly single out the person who baptized them as deserving elevation over other leaders.

In answering this polarization, Paul reveals that in his missions work the act of baptism was largely left to others. He remembers only a few individuals whom he personally baptized in Corinth, and in any case, his primary task was to preach the gospel, not to perform baptisms. Certainly his comments were not intended to disparage baptism, but rather, to put it in its proper relationship to faith in the gospel. It is the gospel itself--the message of the cross of Christ--that is the power of God to save. Baptism points toward this gospel, but baptism is never an end in itself. If it were, baptism would be simply one more example of human wisdom that empties the cross of its power.

Baptism in Other New Testament Documents

Besides the references to baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus in the great commission, Luke and Paul, the remaining references to baptism are brief. In spite

²¹ H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John de Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 397.

of their brevity, or perhaps because of it, they have received a great deal of attention.

Johannine Literature

The writings of John contain no direct references to baptism in the Christian community.²² However, there are Johannine passages which are thought by some to contain oblique references to baptism. Without debating whether the Fourth Gospel is sacramentally oriented,²³ the passages in question may be briefly considered.

Highly Debatable Passages (depending upon an allegorical interpretation):

- Drinking water (Jn. 4:14; 7:37)
- Washing in Siloam (Jn. 9:7)
- Washing feet (Jn. 13:8)
- Water from Jesus' pierced side (Jn. 19:34)

Those favoring a sacramental view of John's Gospel see symbolic references to baptism in the above passages. At best, one can say that this line of interpretation is still being argued. Certainly there are no unambiguous references to baptism here, and it may be that to see baptism in these verses says more about the ingenuity of the interpreter than the intent of John.

A Less Debatable Passage (Jn. 3:5):

There is another passage, however, that frequently is interpreted as referring obliquely to baptism, even by those without a sacramental bent. When Jesus said, "You must be born of water," did he refer to Christian baptism or something else? Obviously, the word "water" is the ambiguity which must be interpreted. Here are the options:

Baptismal Views: In 1 Jn. 5:6, John seems to use the word "water" to refer to Jesus' own baptism. However, even if one wishes to interpret the parallel word "water" in John 3:5 to refer to baptism, there are still two options:

1. *Water* = baptism by John or by Jesus' early disciples; since Jesus obviously expected Nicodemus to understand his words (cf. 3:9-10), the

²² This is true so long as one excludes the baptisms by John and the early baptisms practiced by Jesus' disciples during his ministry.

²³ For a discussion of this theological question, see R. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* (New York: Doubleday, 1966) I.cxi-cxiv; B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), pp. 58-59; R. Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976), pp. 105-109.

most natural explanation would be to see the word “water” as referring to something with which Nicodemus was already familiar.

2. *Water* = Christian baptism; here, Jesus would be anticipating the rite of baptism in the Christian community. However, it seems difficult to see how Nicodemus would have had any prior knowledge of a Christian practice that was still several months or even years into the future, (cf. 3:9-10).

Non –Baptismal Views: If Jesus were not referring to baptism, there remain some other interpretive possibilities:

1. *Water* = the gospel or Word of God based on 1 Pe. 1:23; Ep. 5:26 (The problem here, of course, is whether or not Paul and Peter are talking about the same thing as John; similarity of wording is not necessarily proof of equal intent.)
2. *Water* = the Holy Spirit in a hendiadys.²⁴ (John elsewhere uses the symbol of water for the Holy Spirit, cf. Jn. 7:37-39.)
3. *Water* = natural birth (A fetus emerges at birth from a water-filled sac, and in the surrounding verses there is already a lengthy comparison between natural birth and spiritual birth. If this is so, then Jesus would be saying, in effect, “You must not only be born naturally, i.e., of water, but also spiritually.”)

In summary, it may be said that while the John 3:5 passage probably contains baptismal overtones, the ambiguity forbids using it as a major baptismal text. Unclear passages always must give way to clear passages.²⁵

In Hebrews

There are two passages in Hebrews that sometimes are taken to refer to Christian baptism:

He. 6:1-3

The word “baptisms” is given under the general designation of elementary teachings, and it appears in the plural. Some have interpreted this plural usage to refer to the aggregate of Christian baptisms, and others have interpreted the plural

²⁴ Hendiadys is a grammatical construction in which two nouns connected with the conjunction “and” refer to the same thing.

²⁵ B.Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), pp. 104-106.

form as a reference to water baptism and the baptism in the Holy Spirit. However, the particular word used is a different form than the word usually used for Christian baptism in the New Testament (here it is *baptismos* and elsewhere it is *baptisma* for Christian baptism). In the two other places *baptismos* is found in the New Testament, it clearly refers to Jewish ceremonial washings (cf. Mk. 7:4; He. 9:10). Thus, the RSV translates the phrase in He. 6:2 as “instruction about ablutions,” thus keeping it firmly within a context of Jewish ritual. This rendering is to be preferred. It seems likely, in view of the sects among both Jews and pagans who practiced baptism, that it was important for new converts to be instructed as to the differences between Christian baptism and all the other baptismal rituals available.

He. 10:22-23

The phrase “having our bodies washed with pure water” also often is interpreted as an oblique reference to Christian baptism. If so, it shows that baptism is the outward and visible sign of the inward reality of cleansing. On the other hand, the phrase may be taken as an allusion to Eze. 36:25 and so not refer to Christian baptism at all (so John Calvin).²⁶

In 1 Peter

Some scholars propose that the bulk of 1 Peter (at least sections 1:3--4:12) is primarily a baptismal instruction. Whether or not this is so,²⁷ it is at least certain that Peter makes a symbolic connection between baptism and the flood of Noah (1 Pe. 3:20-21). Peter sees the event of Noah and his family being brought to safety “through the waters”²⁸ as foreshadowing Christian baptism. Baptism is the “pledge toward God proceeding from a good conscience.”²⁹ In other words, God calls for faith, and the believer answers with a sign of his/her faith by submitting to baptism. The power of baptism is the resurrection of Jesus Christ rather than merely a mechanical obedience to a ritualistic demand. Any notion of a magical conception of baptism is rendered untenable by the final phrase. It is not the outward form of baptism that saves but the resurrection power of Christ toward which baptism points.

²⁶ T. Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), p. 163.

²⁷ See discussion in R. Martin, *New Testament Foundations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 2.338-341.

²⁸ I take the genitive construction *di' hydatos* (= through water) to be a genitive of place rather than a genitive of means, i.e., Noah was saved *through* the waters, not *by* the waters (contra KJV).

²⁹ The phrase *syneideseos agathes* (= of a good conscience) is to be taken as a genitive of source.

Major Baptismal Issues

While Christians generally have agreed upon the centrality of baptism as a primary Christian ritual, not all have agreed about various aspects of baptism. Several issues have arisen. The purpose here is not to be polemical over these issues but treat them fairly so as to gain a better understanding and appreciation of those who hold perspectives similar to or different than our own. The major issues are:

- The Question of the Meaning and Effect of Baptism
- The Question of Paedo Baptism vs. Believer's Baptism
- The Question of Baptismal Mode
- The Question of Baptismal Formula
- The Question of Rebaptism
- The Question of Proxy Baptism

The Question of the Meaning and Effect of Baptism

Baptism usually falls under the rituals of the church called sacraments or ordinances. The term sacrament does not occur in the English Bible. Rather, it derives from the Latin word *sacramentum* used in the Vulgate to render the Greek word *mysterion*, a term appearing about twenty times in the letters of Paul. The use of the term *mysterion* in the New Testament points toward the idea that God's redemptive purposes were not fully known until they were revealed in the Christ event. The incarnation is at the heart of this mystery (1 Ti. 3:16).³⁰ Just as Jesus was the embodiment of God's redemptive plan, he discharged to his followers two practices to embody the redemptive meaning of his work, serving as signs pointing toward believers' participation in the new covenant. These two practices are baptism and the Lord's table.³¹

The common definition of a sacrament comes from St. Augustine (AD 354-430), who said that a sacrament was a "visible sign of an invisible reality." All branches of Christianity concur with this definition, though each branch has a different conception of just what rituals make up true sacraments. Furthermore, the major branches of Christianity differ in how they understand the relationship

³⁰ Other passages in the Pauline literature using the term *mysterion* are Ro. 11:25; 16:25; 1 Co. 2:7; 4:1; 13:2; 14:2; 15:51; Col. 1:26-27; 2:2; 4:3; Ep. 1:9; 3:3-9; 5:32; 6:19; 2 Th. 2:7; 1 Ti. 3:9, 16. To these should be added the parallel usage in the synoptic gospels (Mk. 4:11; Mt. 13:11; Lk. 8:10). For a discussion of the theological meaning of the term *mysterion*, see G. Barker, *ISBE* (1986) 3.451-455.

³¹ G. Bromiley, *ISBE* (1988) IV.256-257.

between the visible sign and the invisible reality. The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrate seven sacraments; Protestants celebrate two.³²

<u>Roman Catholic</u>	<u>Eastern Orthodox</u>	<u>Protestant</u>
<i>Baptism</i>	<i>Baptism</i>	<i>Baptism</i>
<i>Eucharist</i>	<i>Eucharist</i>	<i>Eucharist</i>
<i>Confirmation</i>	<i>Chrismation</i>	
<i>Marriage</i>	<i>Marriage</i>	
<i>Ordination</i>	<i>Ordination</i>	
<i>Penance</i>	<i>Confession</i>	
<i>Extreme Unction</i>	<i>Holy Unction</i>	

As to the logic behind the number of sacraments, Protestants argue that only two have explicit biblical sanction. As to the relationship between the reality and the sign, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy hold to the objective power of the sacraments, that is, that the sacraments have power in themselves, though to be fair it should be noted that for Roman Catholics the sacraments do not produce grace if there is an obstacle to it in the soul. For Catholics, the sacraments can only be given effectively to believers. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic view of the sacraments is that they are not merely signs, but they actually do convey what they indicate.³³ Similarly, in Eastern Orthodoxy, while the things necessary to make the sacraments valid are the canonical clergy, the material of the sacrament itself (oil, wine, water, etc.) and the proper ceremonial words, still it is maintained that the recipient cannot fully appropriate the properties of the sacrament unless he/she has a proper spiritual attitude and a prepared soul.³⁴ Protestants, on the other hand, more directly emphasize the subjective role of faith which alone makes the sacraments meaningful. Similarly, Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy hold that at least some of the sacraments are obligatory for salvation. Protestants hold that while the sacraments are obligatory in the sense that they were commanded by Christ, they are not in themselves effective for salvation, and in

³² However, some Protestants, mainly within the holiness-Pentecostal groups, also treat the ritual of foot-washing as an ordinance. Most Protestants see the event of preaching as sacramental as well, cf. D. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 2. 71-83.

³³ N.G.M. Van Doornik et al., *A Handbook of the Catholic Faith* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 246-254.

³⁴ C. N. Callinicos, *The Greek Orthodox Catechism* (New York: Greek Archdiocese of No. and So. America, 1960), pp. 39-40.

fact, cannot be considered to be necessary things “one must do” in order to be saved.³⁵

Besides the above general distinctions, there are some minor distinctions to be mentioned also. Some Christians, Quakers for instance, reject all sacraments. The Radical Reformers in the 16th and 17th century rejected the very word sacrament, preferring instead the word *ordinance* and/or the word *sign*.³⁶ This latter was in the interest of avoiding sacramentalism, that is, to oppose the view that baptism and the Lord’s table were inherently efficacious and necessary for salvation. In general, Protestants are not opposed to using the term sacrament if such usage is limited to the two practices specifically instituted by Jesus Christ and if such practices are not regarded as salvific in themselves, but rather, as signs pointing toward the salvation that is in Christ alone.

The primary question concerns how baptism is related to conversion and salvation. There are two main positions, *baptismal regeneration* and *baptism as symbol and sign*.

Baptismal Regeneration

Here, baptism is the effective means of salvation. The act of baptism is necessary for the forgiveness of sins³⁷ and/or the gift of the Holy Spirit. One who is unbaptized is unsaved. This position is based on the following ideas:

- In the Bible, baptism is everywhere presupposed as normal for believers.
- There is no hint of unbaptized Christians.
- The early Christians viewed baptism as a means of grace. It was clearly connected with salvation (1 Pe. 3:21), regeneration (Tit. 3:5) and forgiveness of sins (Ac. 2:38; 22:16).³⁸
- Obedience to the command for baptism is essential (Mt. 28:19). Without being “born of water”, one cannot enter the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:5).

³⁵ V. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1964) 211-213; I. and K. Cully, *An Introductory Theological Wordbook* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1943) 177-179; L. Rosten, ed., *Religions in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963) 26, 32-33, 82-83.

³⁶ Bromiley, 258.

³⁷ The notion that there is a difference between forgiveness and remission of sins must be rejected by all serious students of the Bible. This is a distinction that can be maintained only in the KJV. The Greek *aphesis* underlies both English equivalents.

³⁸ See discussion in G. Bromiley, “Baptismal Regeneration,” *EDT*, ed. W. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 119.

Baptism As Symbol and Sign³⁹

Here, baptism is a symbol or sign pointing toward forgiveness of sins and the salvation which is by grace through faith. Baptism is a privilege and a duty, but it is not the effective means by which spiritual change is accomplished. This position is based on the following ideas:

- Christian baptism is a duty, because it was commanded by the Lord, but it cannot be precisely the same as regeneration, because God's acceptance and the gift of the Spirit clearly preceded Christian baptism on some occasions (Ac. 10:44-48; 11:17-18; 15:8-9, 11). Furthermore, the baptism of John the Baptist may have been sufficient in the cases of the twelve apostles and Apollos (there is no biblical account of them being baptized again).
- Salvation is by grace through faith, not by works (Ep. 2:8-10). If baptism corresponds to circumcision (Col. 2:11-12), then by analogy it is not the means of righteousness for Christians any more than circumcision was the means of righteousness for Abraham (Ro. 4:7-11).
- Baptism clearly is related to salvation, conversion, forgiveness and regeneration by the Holy Spirit. However, it functions as a sign pointing toward these realities rather than as an effective means to bring them about. The sign may be simultaneous with the effect, and often it is, but not necessarily so.

What then is one to make of these positions? Obviously, much hangs on the answer as far as the theology of Christian baptism is concerned. As early as the mid-2nd century AD, the idea of baptism as an effective means was strong for at least some Christians, for they believed, "We....obtain *in the water* the remission of sins formerly committed" (emphasis mine).⁴⁰ Again, Justin Martyr states, "...baptism is alone able to purify those who have repented."⁴¹

Protestant teaching has emphasized the critical relationship between baptism and faith. Luther, for instance, says that baptism "works forgiveness, delivers from death and the devil and gives eternal salvation *to all who believe* (emphasis mine)," and further, "It is not the water that does them [i.e., these great things) indeed, but the Word of God which is in and with the water, and faith which trusts this Word

³⁹ See discussion, Beasley-Murray, 296ff.

⁴⁰ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 61.

⁴¹ *Dialogue with Trypho*, xiv.

of God in the water." Even with respect to children, the element of faith is critical, for as Luther states, "We baptize little children because they too are included in 'all nations', because they too are sinful and must be born again, and because they too can believe."⁴² A more contemporary evangelical expression can be found in Donald Bloesch, who says that the "overall view of the New Testament seems to be that baptism by itself is not indispensable for salvation, but baptism joined with repentance and faith becomes the means by which people receive the gift of regeneration."⁴³

It is initially to be observed that either position on baptism is susceptible to extremism.⁴⁴ On the one hand, the baptismal regeneration view is susceptible to a salvation-by-works theology. It may become distorted to the point that baptism becomes a magic act so that salvation is automatic. On the other hand, the view of baptism as sign and symbol may well empty the act of baptism of everything but a psychological effect so that baptism actually serves as nothing more than a reminder. The truth is probably somewhere between these extremes. To do justice to all the New Testament says, baptism must be viewed as less than a magic act but more than just a symbol. It is a divinely ordained action that both testifies to God's grace and becomes a means of that grace so long as it is expressed in faith. It is not the sole means of grace, but it is an important one. Salvation does not depend upon baptism alone, but salvation is the reality toward which baptism points and the reality confirmed and sealed in baptism.

Finally, it is always in order to remember that the primary saving act is not the believer's ritual water baptism but Christ's baptism into death for our sins (Mk. 10:38; Lk. 12:50).

The Question of Paedobaptism versus Believer's Baptism

The question of paedobaptism (infant baptism) as opposed to believer's baptism has long been a divisive issue, sometimes to the point of very un-Christian attitudes, abusiveness and, in some cases, even violence.

All Christian denominations (except groups that do not practice baptism at all, e.g., Quakers and the Salvation Army) practice baptism as a rite of entry into the church. The first subjects of baptism in any missionary endeavor are always converts, and this applies to both baptists and paedobaptists. The issue of contention is not whether it is proper to baptize converts, but whether it is proper to baptize infants.

⁴² C. Gausewitz, ed., *Doctor Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1956), pp. 11-12, 194.

⁴³ Bloesch, 2. 12.

⁴⁴ G. Bromiley, "Baptism," *EDT*, 113-114.

It frankly must be admitted at the outset that the New Testament neither directly advocates nor forbids infant baptism. The earliest Christians did not address the issue, at least not in the way the question is framed today, and there are no unambiguous references in the biblical documents. To be sure, all direct descriptions of baptism in the New Testament are of believers, but it must also be remembered that there are no descriptions of second generation Christians in the New Testament. The arguments pro and con must proceed upon other grounds.

Infant Baptism

The arguments in favor of infant baptism come from both scripture (implied) and history (direct). They are as follows:

New Testament Household Baptisms

Of the eleven baptismal occasions recorded in the New Testament, four of them speak of household baptisms (Ac. 10:24, 47-48; 16:14-15; 16:33; 1 Co. 1:13-16). The Greek terms seem to indicate a strong possibility if not probability that infants were included:

- ♦ *syngeneis kai philous* = relatives and friends
- ♦ *oikos* = family
- ♦ *autos kai hoi autou hapantes* = he [the jailer] and all who belonged to his family

The household community was one of the basic social structures in the Greco-Roman world. It was a large inclusive social unit composed of a master, his family, relatives, friends, clients, and slaves.⁴⁵

The Sign of the Covenant

Since the New Testament concept of covenant is related to the Old Testament concept of the covenant, then infants should be baptized. The Old Testament sign of the covenant was circumcision performed eight days after birth (Ge. 17:9-14). Baptism is the comparable sign of the new covenant (cf. Col. 2:11-12), and therefore it should be administered to infants.

Family Solidarity

The Bible indicates that God deals with families as well as with individuals. When Noah passed through the flood, a foreshadowing of baptism (cf. 1 Pe. 3:20-21), his whole family was saved with him. The exodus and crossing of the sea, the

⁴⁵ D. Tidball, *The Social Context of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1984), pp. 79-86.

greatest redemptive act of the Old Testament, also foreshadowed baptism (cf. 1 Co. 10:1-2), and it was for entire families. The children of “mixed” marriages (i.e., a believer married to an unbeliever) are considered holy (1 Co. 7:14), that is, they are entitled to a life within the covenant and are to be considered a part of the Christian community until they are old enough to take that responsibility upon themselves.⁴⁶

New Testament Acceptance of Children

There is no question but that children reached a new level of acceptance in the ministry of Christ. They received Jesus' blessing as members of the kingdom (Mt. 19:13-14), and those who tried to restrain them were rebuked (Mk. 10:13-16). God's ways can be known even by little children (Lk. 10:21), and God can be praised by infants (Mt. 21:16).

Baptism is an Anticipation of Repentance and Faith

While baptism as a covenant sign can surely be an adult expression of faith (as when Abraham was circumcised, Ge. 17:24), it also can be an anticipation of faith to be confirmed later (as when Isaac was circumcised at eight days but confirmed in his faith as an adult, Ge. 21:4; 26:2-6).

Christian History

Several important early Christian leaders considered infant baptism to be a practice authorized and handed down by the apostles, including Irenaeus, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Augustine, Cyprian, Hippolytus and others. Possible allusions to infant baptism may be found as early as Polycarp and Justin Martyr (mid-2nd century), though to be fair it must be conceded that these latter two are not direct mentions.⁴⁷ If the practice was not endorsed by the apostles, how and why did it originate? It was not part of the Jewish tradition. It had no precedent in Greco-Roman culture. Were these earlier Christians leaders simply mistaken, or were they intentionally deceptive when they said the practice derived from the apostles? We trust them in other important ways, not the least of which is the canon of the Scriptures!

The fact that there are no specific mentions of infant baptism in the New Testament is only to be expected in a church of first generation believers. It is

⁴⁶ F. Grosheide, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), p. 165; L. Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 110.

⁴⁷ Polycarp, in answering the proconsul just before his martyrdom, said that he had been Christ's servant for 86 years, cf. *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 9. Assuming that this was his age at the time, the assumption is made that Polycarp was baptized as an infant. Justin Martyr speaks of men and women who had been Christians from childhood, possibly implying infant baptism, cf. *1st Apology*, xv.

second generation Christians who practice infant baptism.

The seriousness of the question of infant baptism is compounded when it is attached to the position one takes on the effect of baptism. For instance, if one defends baptismal regeneration but rejects the validity of infant baptism, he/she must also condemn millions of Christians through the ages, including some of those recognized as the greatest thinkers in the Christian church (e.g., Augustine,⁴⁸ Luther, Calvin).

Especially within the Roman Catholic Church, the practice of infant baptism is directly connected with the idea of original sin. The doctrine of original sin, the belief that humans inherit guilt from Adam's transgression, was articulated most definitively by St. Augustine (AD 354-430).⁴⁹ In Roman Catholic thought, infant baptism is believed to be the means through which children receive forgiveness for original sin.⁵⁰ Without this sacrament, infants who die have not received sanctifying grace, so they cannot go to heaven. At the same time, they have not deserved hell,⁵¹ so they go to limbo, where they experience a purely natural happiness, though not the beatific vision (the immediate view of God).⁵²

Believer's Baptism

Believer's baptism is practiced by all segments of the Christian church (i.e., even paedobaptists also baptize believers), but the uniqueness of the baptist position is that it allows for *only* believer baptism. The arguments in favor of the baptist position are primarily biblical rather than historical. The historical support for infant baptism by the early fathers is dismissed by baptists as either ambiguous (as, in fact, it is in some cases) or distorted (i.e., in those cases where it clearly seems to refer to an apostolic tradition).

New Testament Descriptions of Believer's Baptism

Baptists assert that only believers are specifically mentioned as candidates for baptism. Household baptisms, because infants are not specifically mentioned, are assumed not to have included infants.

⁴⁸ Even though Augustine himself was baptized as an adult, cf. *Confessions*, IX.vi, he was a strong advocate of infant baptism.

⁴⁹ V. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theology Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), pp. 221-223.

⁵⁰ N. Doornick et. al., *A Handbook of the Catholic Faith* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 264.

⁵¹ Actually, St. Augustine did contend that unbaptized infants go to hell.

⁵² Harvey, pp. 39, 146.

Faith is an Implicit and Explicit Prerequisite for Baptism

In the great commission, baptism is for disciples (Mt. 28:19; Mk. 16:16). It is for those who have repented (Ac. 2:38) and believed (Ac. 8:36-37, Western Text, cf. KJV). If salvation is by grace through faith (Ac. 8:12-13; 16:14-15; 16:31-33; 18:8; 19:5), and if baptism expresses that faith in a public confession of Jesus as Lord (Ro. 10:8-10; 1 Co. 12:3), then baptism is for those who are old enough to hear, comprehend and respond to the gospel. How can an infant possibly express faith?

Some Problems

The positions discussed above have led to two other practices, neither of which originate from strictly biblical directives. The paedobaptist practices *confirmation* so that the one who has been baptized as an infant may have the opportunity to affirm his or her faith as a conscious act. The baptist, on the other hand, often practices the *dedication* of infants, a prayer for the spiritual well-being of the infant usually long before he/she is baptized, and baptism must wait until the child reaches the proposed “age of accountability.” The former practice derives from the need for a conscious confession of faith, the latter from the need for an inclusion of the infant under the shelter of the Christian community. The paedobaptist does not need infant dedication, and the baptist does not need adult confirmation.

Each of the positions is liable to yet a further problem. The paedobaptist runs the risk of relying on a ritual for salvation rather than upon a living faith. Those contending for believer's baptism sometimes fail to adequately address the problem of adults who received baptism primarily because they were told to do so rather than because they possessed a clear understanding of the rite or had come to a clear sense of faith in Christ. There is little substantial difference between baptizing uninformed adults and baptizing infants.

A Response

The more baptism is seen as the expression of the candidate's faith, the less easy it is to support infant baptism. Alternatively, the more baptism is seen as the expression of divine grace, that is, as a sign pointing toward God's gracious action in Christ, the easier it is to support infant baptism. In either case, Christians must take care not to overvalue baptism in the same way that the Judaizers of the early Christian churches overvalued circumcision. A mediating response to the question of infant versus believer baptism is preferable:⁵³

⁵³ Following are three helpful books if one wishes to pursue the arguments for the respective positions in more depth.

- ♦ Due to the centrality of faith as connected with baptism, it is difficult to unequivocally support the baptism of infants.
- ♦ At the same time, the possibility that the New Testament church may have baptized infants or that later Christians derived the practice of infant baptisms from the apostles cannot be eliminated.
- ♦ Hence, to demand rebaptism for those who already have been baptized as infants and who understand their baptism as a sign pointing toward God's gracious action seems unwarranted.
- ♦ However, for those whose baptism as an infant meant nothing either then or later, an adult baptism as a conscious expression of faith need not be refused.

The Question of Baptismal Mode

There are principally three modes (physical procedures) by which baptism has been administered in the history of Christendom. They are:

Immersion (where the candidate's whole body is submerged under the water)

Pouring (also called affusion, where water is poured upon the head of the candidate who may stand either in water or out of water)

Sprinkling (also called aspersion, where water is sprinkled on the head or face of the candidate)

Which of these methods, if any, is to be preferred? For some Christians not only has it been a matter of preference but also of necessity, and the mode of baptism, particularly when coupled with a belief in baptismal regeneration, has become critical. The practices of the Jews, ancient Christians and the relevant biblical evidence bear directly upon this question.

The Modes in Christian History

Before addressing the question of preference, it may initially be observed that both pouring and immersion were practiced very early. Both modes are mentioned

Pro Believer Baptism: P. Jewett, *Infant Baptism & the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978).

Pro Infant Baptism: O. Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1950).

Mediating Position: D. Bridge and D. Phipers, *The Water That Divides: the Baptism Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1977).

in the same context as early as about AD 120.⁵⁴ Here it says that in the case of a shortage of water, pouring water three times on the head of the candidate was acceptable. In the early centuries of Christianity, it seems that immersion was preferable but that pouring was also valid and used on certain occasions.

Sprinkling was also known to the early Christian communities and defended as valid by Cyprian (3rd century), but immersion and pouring prevailed as the usual modes until the 13th century, when sprinkling became almost universally practiced.⁵⁵

The Practice of the New Testament Christians

It would be convenient if the New Testament church had addressed this issue, but since it did not, the modern interpreter must approach it on grounds other than direct biblical statements. While passages such as Mk. 1:10 and Ac. 8:38 are sometimes called upon to support immersion, they could equally apply to pouring.

The arguments in favor of immersion may be grouped into four categories. First, archaeological evidence of Jewish baptism preceding Christian baptism clearly required immersion.⁵⁶ Second, the classical meaning of the Greek verb *baptizo* is “to dip.”⁵⁷ Third, the metaphorical value of immersion seems best to parallel the events of Christ’s burial and resurrection. The candidate is “buried with Christ” in baptism (Ro. 6:4; Col. 2:12). Finally, immersion seems to have been preferred by the early church.

Many Christians see the mode of baptism as an indifferent matter, however. On the one hand, the case for immersion is not so strong as is sometimes supposed. The Greek verb *baptizo* is used to indicate the Jewish ceremonial pouring of water on the hands (cf. Lk. 11:38; Mk. 7:4/variant reading), and thus to conclude that baptism *must* be a bodily immersion overstates the linguistic case. The earliest pictorial representations of baptisms by early Christians commonly pictured them as by pouring rather than immersion, so the argument from history at least is questionable.⁵⁸ Also, while the early church preferred immersion, they also allowed affusion. In any case, a preference cannot be made into a necessity.

⁵⁴ *Didache* 7.

⁵⁵ T. Lindsay, *ISBE* (1979) 1.419-420.

⁵⁶ W. LaSor, "Discovering What Jewish Miqva'ot Can Tell Us About Christian Baptism," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1987) pp. 52-59. In fact, rabbinic scholars clarified that even the hair must be totally immersed. Ribbons on the head would invalidate a girl's baptism, *Miqva'ot* 9.1. No part of the body's surface must be untouched by water, cf. H. Danby, *The Mishnah, Translated from the Hebrew with Introduction and Brief Explanatory Notes* (London: Oxford University, 1933), p. 742, note 5 as referenced in LaSor.

⁵⁷ A. Robertson, *ISBE* (1979) 1.415-416.

⁵⁸ T. Lindsay, *ISBE* (1979) 1.419.

The alternate modes also have metaphorical value based on other images associated with baptism. Sprinkling effectively represents the sprinkling of Jesus' blood (cf. He. 10:22), and pouring represents the gift of the Spirit which is "poured out" and is closely connected with baptism. It should also be considered that to place the validity of baptism on the grounds of the technical application of a rite which is nowhere precisely described in the New Testament seems foreign to the spirit of the New Testament. This is not to say that the mode of any Christian ritual is superfluous, but only to say that in the case of ambiguity, its dogmatism seems unwarranted.

A Response to the Issue

In the end, it seems highly appropriate to avoid any theological position that verges on a works-righteousness oriented salvation. It must be conceded that nowhere in the New Testament did Jesus or the apostles ever emphasize that baptism was to be conducted in a precise manner before it was acceptable. If the precision of the physical action was critical, it seems reasonable to expect the Bible to have said so in clear language.

On the other hand, Christians will want to remain close to the practice of the earliest Christians. One may wish to practice immersion as a preference, but it would be beyond the biblical and historical evidence to demand immersion as necessary grounds for baptismal validity, or even more severely, for salvation. The ritual must never become more important than the reality behind it, and the reality is grace and faith.

The Question of Baptismal Formula

For most Christians, the question of baptismal formula, that is, what words or phrases are to be repeated over the baptismal candidate at the time of baptism, is obscure. It had never been debated in Christian history and did not arise as a baptismal controversy until the early 1900s, when it arose within the fledgling Pentecostal movement, dividing it within three years. This question, called the "new issue", was born in April 1913. By 1916 it had erupted into a controversy so sharp that it had fractured the Assemblies of God, a denomination that had only been formed in 1914.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ J. Howell, "Jesus Rediscovered: The New Issue Controversy in the Assemblies of God," *The First Occasional Symposium Aspects of the Oneness Pentecostal Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Jeffrey Gill/Harvard Divinity School, 1984) 15ff.

The Doctrinal Tenets of the New Issue

Several factors led to the conclusion that in Ac. 2:38 the phrase, “...in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ....,” was the only valid baptismal formula. The most important of these were:

- ♦ The belief that the word “Jesus” had saving power (based on Ac. 4:12).
- ♦ A special interpretation of Mt. 28:19 that stripped it of its apparent validity as a baptismal formula. This was done in one or more of the following ways:
 1. By insisting that Ac. 2:38 was a direct interpretation of Mt. 28:19 so that: “Father” = Lord (Jehovah), “Son” = Jesus, and “Holy Spirit” = Christ (the Anointed).
 2. By attempting to prove that the name “Jesus” was the proper name of the Father and of the Holy Spirit, as well as the name of the Son (based on Jn. 5:43; 14:26).
 3. By casting doubt on the textual validity of Mt. 28:19.
 4. By asserting that the words Father, Son and Holy Spirit are titles, not names. Hence, when Jesus said “into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” he did not mean for his apostles to use these words as a baptismal formula, but rather, he intended them to use the name “Jesus” that stood behind the titles.

These positions were coupled with a theology of baptismal regeneration (based on Jn. 3:5), and in the end it meant that all who had not been baptized in the “correct” way had to be rebaptized (based on Ac. 19:1-6). Furthermore, only those so baptized were held to be truly Christian. Thus, almost all believers in Jesus Christ except the ones in their group were openly condemned as unsaved. In answer to the question as to how Mt. 28:19 began as a baptismal formula in the first place, since it is virtually universal in Christianity, the “new issue” Pentecostals asserted that this practice was an intentional deception introduced by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.

The Fallacies of the New Issue:

There is certainly no objection to be raised against baptizing with any biblical formula, such as, a phrase from Acts 2:38. However, the exclusive notion attached to such a formula rests on an inadequate base.

Misuse of Scripture

In the first place, there is no justification for saying that the spoken word

“Jesus” at baptism administers saving grace. Such a position reduces salvation to a technicality which, in effect, destroys the New Testament affirmation that salvation is by grace through faith and not human works. The fact that even they do not pronounce the name in either Greek or Aramaic (*Iesous* or *yeshua*) begs the question.

Second, the interpretive handling of Mt. 28:19 has no validity. Nothing in the New Testament warrants saying that the name of the Father or the Holy Spirit is “Jesus.” The passages called upon are clearly speaking of Jesus’ rank rather than the word “Jesus” *per se*. To say that Jesus came “in his Father’s name” or that the Holy Spirit would be sent “in Christ’s name” is no more than to speak of Christ’s authority.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the Greek language of the New Testament does not maintain the tight distinction between titles and names in the same way as English. To say that “Son” or “Father” or “Holy Spirit” are titles but not names is to inject a modern English nuance back into 1st century Greek that does not properly exist.

Third, the notion that the term Father is a synonym for the term Lord or that the term Holy Spirit is a synonym for the term Christ has no biblical support.

Finally, there is not an extant Greek manuscript of the latter part of Matthew’s gospel that does not have Mt. 28:19 just as one presently reads it. While the textual validity of Mt. 28:19 has been questioned by a few scholars on the grounds of patristic quotations, the overwhelming conclusion is in favor of its validity.

Misrepresentation of History

It is a serious distortion of history to say that the Roman Catholic Church changed the baptismal formula in AD 325 in order to dupe the Christian world. In the first place, by the end of the first century the formula in Mt. 28:19 was clearly being used.⁶¹ Next, the Council of Nicaea did not address the issue of baptismal formula at all. The charge says more about anti-Roman Catholicism than it does about baptism.

The Baptismal Formula

To ask, “What is the correct baptismal formula?” begs the question, “Is there a single baptismal formula at all?” It should be observed that no description appears in the New Testament of a baptism in which words were called out over the baptismal candidate. The closest thing to such a formula is Acts 22:16, where the candidate himself, Paul, invoked Christ’s name. The confession “Jesus is Lord”

⁶⁰ W. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Co., n.d.), p. 782.

⁶¹ *Didache* 7. The *Didache* directly quotes Matthew 28:19 with reference to baptism: *...thus shall you baptize. Having first recited all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*

is often thought to arise from a baptismal context, and this may well be so, but it cannot be held as a baptismal formula. Sometimes James 2:7 (where the Greek text reads, “the good name which was called upon you”) is taken to refer to a baptismal formula, and this is certainly possible, but it could equally apply to the name “Christian” (Ac. 11:26).⁶²

The Traditional Formula(ae)

Several passages have been used as baptismal formulae (Mt. 28:19; Ac. 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5). However, it is doubtful whether any of these phrases were intended to be liturgical formulae in the strict sense of the word, far less that one of them is “correct” and the others inadequate.⁶³ There is no question that the church has used them for formulae, and there is no objection to be raised for doing so as long as it is understood that such a usage is a development of church practice and does not arise from a specific biblical mandate for a liturgical formula. There is no reason to suppose that, given an adequate understanding of the significance of baptism in the Christian community, if no formula at all were used it would not necessarily strip baptism of its meaning.

The Possibility of Diverse Formulas

Even if one wishes to use the above mentioned passages as formulae, it must be frankly admitted that there is no precise wording common to them all. Some have the name “Christ”, and others do not. Some have “Lord”, and others do not. Some have “Jesus”, and others do not. It seems probable that as the church developed such passages into liturgical usage, they felt no embarrassment at a multiplicity of forms. Certainly by the end of the first century one can find diverse wordings used practically side by side, as evidenced in the *Didache*.

*...baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...
...they that have been baptized into the name of the Lord...⁶⁴*

It is conceivable that the shorter formula, “in the name of Jesus,” was used for Jews (who already believed in God the Father and in the Holy Spirit) and that the longer formula, “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,”

⁶² J. Adamson, *The Epistle of James* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 112-113.

⁶³ D. Carson, “Matthew,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), VIII.598; W. Albright and C. Mann, *Matthew [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), p. 363.

⁶⁴ *Didache* 7 and 9.

was used for pagans (who did not believe in God at all, at least in a Christian sense.)⁶⁵ In any case, a precise set of words cannot be demanded.

“Into the Name of”

If the passages in question were not necessarily intended to be formulae, what might be their meaning? As noted earlier, the phrase “into the name of” corresponds to the Hebrew-Aramaic *le-shem*, a phrase used of Jewish slave baptisms to denote a relationship between the slave and his/her new family. In Jewish purification rituals, the phrase “into the name of” could refer to the witness of the baptism. Since Jewish ritual required a witness, the phrase might refer to the one who watched rather than the one who administered baptism.⁶⁶ The primary witness for Christian baptism was therefore God. Hence, “in the name of” must point to a meaning such as “in the interest of”, “in appropriation to” “belonging to”, “for the sake of” and so forth.⁶⁷ The Greek meaning is very similar and indicates something like “in acknowledgment or confession of” or “in recognition of the authority of.”⁶⁸ Thus, to be baptized “into the name of Jesus” or “into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” probably refers not so much to what is called out over the candidate as it refers to the nature of Christian baptism itself. Baptism signifies the beginning of a new relationship between the candidate and God.

The Question of Rebaptism

Many Christian groups have defended the correctness of their particular understanding of Christian baptism (whether effect, mode or formula) to the point of requiring the rebaptism of any believers who were originally baptized under a different orientation. The most well-known of these, historically speaking, were the Anabaptists of the Reformation (anabaptist = rebaptizer), the radical movement that would accept neither the baptisms practiced in the Roman Catholic Church nor the baptisms practiced by the Reformers, primarily due to the Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism. However, though this heritage of rebaptism is still defended today, it is an irony that had the Anabaptists themselves lived today they would have had to submit to rebaptism in order to belong to most Baptist groups who require immersion (the Anabaptists baptized by pouring).⁶⁹ Since the 1600s, various other Christian groups have required rebaptism on grounds of paedobaptism, mode,

⁶⁵ F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts [NICNT]* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 181.

⁶⁶ S. LaSor, "Discovering what Jewish Miqva'ot Can Tell us About Christian Baptism," *BAR* (Jan/Feb 1987), p. 58.

⁶⁷ Beasley-Murray, p. 91.

⁶⁸ Carson, p. 597; Vine, p. 782.

⁶⁹ E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), p. 333.

formula and so forth. The grounds for demanding rebaptism in all cases is the view that one's original baptism is inadequate or invalid, either by the style of the baptism or the ministers by whom it was administered.

Rebaptism in the New Testament

The biblical basis for rebaptism rests on Paul's encounter with the twelve disciples who knew only of John's baptism (Ac. 19:1-5). In this case, Paul administered a second baptism, one that recognized the fulfillment of John's predictions about Jesus. However, the evidence for rebaptism is split, because Apollos, who also knew only John's baptism and who was enlightened by Priscilla and Aquila as to the fullness of the gospel (Ac. 18:24-26), apparently was not rebaptized. Neither, so far as we know, were the apostles rebaptized, though several of them were certainly disciples of John the Baptist before they were disciples of Jesus. How should one assess this evidence?

Precisely because the evidence is split, one should be cautious in making too many assumptions. In the first place, it is not specified that Paul required a rebaptism for the Ephesian disciples of John. The initiative for a second baptism could well have come from the disciples themselves. They may have requested to be baptized again. Secondly, even their understanding of John the Baptist's message was limited, because they apparently knew nothing of the Holy Spirit which was so central to John's preaching. Finally, it must be frankly admitted that the issue of John's baptism is an issue that the church does not, and by its very nature cannot, address today. Certainly there is no clear precedent in this passage for rebaptism on the grounds of paedobaptism, baptismal mode or baptismal formula.

The Implications of Rebaptism

Rebaptism, when it has been practiced, has always been an issue of division in the church, and it could hardly be anything less. To require someone to be rebaptized is at the same time to imply, rather pointedly, that he or she is a substandard Christian, or worse, not a Christian at all, especially since the significance of baptism points toward forgiveness, new life and entrance into the Christian community. If one calls for rebaptism merely to achieve a pattern closer to a perceived practice by the early church, but without any real change in the status of the candidate, then why require it at all? Furthermore, who is to say which aspect of the ritual is necessary and which is dispensable? Since the early Christians preferred cold water rather than warm and running water rather than still,⁷⁰ should Christians today then make these conditions the basis for rebaptism

⁷⁰ *Didache* 7. The passage in question reads: "baptize...in living water. But if thou hast not living water, than baptize in

as well?

Perhaps the views of John Calvin are worth reiterating. While thoroughly Protestant, Calvin nevertheless refused to call for rebaptism, even by those who were baptized in the Roman Catholic Church.⁷¹ He argued that a sacrament was valid not according to the hand of the one who administered it but according to God himself. Baptism neither gains dignity nor loses it by the administrator.⁷² Hence, he declared that the Anabaptists were wrong.

In view of Paul's great call for Christian unity (Ep.4:3,13), a unity that is expressed in the "one baptism" of the Christian church (Ep.4:5), the question of rebaptism must be approached with great reserve and caution.

A Case for Voluntary (but not mandatory) Rebaptism

Those who wish to demand rebaptism on the basis of Acts 19:1-5, regardless of their reason, must realize that the passage cited does not say that rebaptism was demanded. The language here is passive, and it does not carry the force of an imperative, such as is found in Acts 2:38; 10:48; 22:16. One can just as well assume that the disciples at Ephesus requested rebaptism, though this too is uncertain. On the other hand, for one to assert that rebaptism is never to be permitted seems untenable in light of this one biblical case. Given the ambiguity of the situation and the fact that the church no longer addresses the issue of those formerly baptized according to the preaching of John the Baptist, it would seem feasible that the decision for rebaptism might better come from the individual who himself judges his original baptism to be inadequate rather than having that decision handed down from the clergy or the church. Such an approach would do two things. First, it would avoid dividing Christians over the baptismal issue since no judgments would be leveled against any person or denomination. Second, it would allow the decision for rebaptism, if it is to be made, to arise from the conscience of the candidate rather than being imposed from an authoritarian structure.⁷³

The Question of Proxy Baptism

Proxy baptism, that is, baptism in behalf of someone else, is based on an obscure reference by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:29-30. Here, in a discussion about

other water; and if thou art not able in cold, then in warm."

⁷¹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), II.521 (sec. 16).

⁷² W. Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 54-56.

⁷³ This conclusion is precisely that found in the closing sections of the works by Beasley-Murray, 392, and Bridge and Phipers, 198. However, the author came to a similar conclusion before having read either of these works.

resurrection, Paul makes an oblique allusion to a practice of baptizing *hyper ton nekron* (= on behalf of the dead ones). Since his comment is merely a passing illustration, it neither endorses, rejects nor explains the practice. Mormons have made the practice of proxy baptism a central part of their faith,⁷⁴ but Christians have rejected it as a valid baptism. What did Paul mean by this obscure phrase?

Early Christian History

While we may not know precisely to what Paul was alluding, there is some evidence that vicarious baptism was practiced among the gnostic sect of the Cerinthians (early 2nd century), the Marcionites (early 2nd century), the Novationists (mid-3rd century) and the Cataphryges, the latter who practiced the baptism of corpses.⁷⁵ This would seem to indicate that at least some early Christian groups (and these are usually considered marginal or even heretical) took Paul's words as a legitimizing force.

Different Interpretations

There are several primary interpretations of this passage (not to mention a host of minor ones). Following are some of the more common ones are:

- ... that Paul alludes to a legitimate “miracle working rite” that had magical powers.⁷⁶
- ... that Paul really has in mind the baptism of believers with the view that they will eventually be united with their Christian friends who have died. (The language of the Greek text does not favor this view).⁷⁷
- ... that by “the dead” Paul means those who are dead in sin. (The context makes this interpretation difficult because Paul's subject is physical resurrection.)⁷⁸
- ... that Paul has in mind a proxy baptism for believers who died (in an epidemic?) before they could be baptized.⁷⁹
- ... that Paul's allusion is so brief that we can gain no inkling of his intent or meaning.

⁷⁴ Doctrine and Covenants, 128.5.

⁷⁵ G. Bromiley, “Baptism for the Dead,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 119.

⁷⁶ R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. K. Grobel (New York: Scribners, 1951), I.135-136.

⁷⁷ G. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), pp. 186-187.

⁷⁸ W. Orr and J. Walther, *I Corinthians [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), p. 337.

⁷⁹ F. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 148.

Assessment

Of the above interpretations, the last one is the safest though probably the least satisfactory since it leaves the question open. The very proliferation of interpretations indicates that there is no certainty. Consequently, it is well to suspend judgment. Whatever Paul meant, it would be improper to use this verse as a mandate for a Christian practice. Christians have done well to avoid building a ritual on so uncertain a base.

Appendix

Some Historical Observations Regarding the Practice of Christian Baptism

Polycarp (martyred ca. AD 155)

“Eighty-six years I have been His (Christ’s) slave...” (many believe his statement implies infant baptism in about AD 69-70)

Didache (ca. AD 120)

Baptism is to be in running water rather than still if possible, cold water rather than warm if possible. If there is a shortage of water, pouring over the head three times in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is permissible.

Early 2nd Century

Mt. 28:19 appears to be virtually universal in the church as the common baptismal formula.

Justin Martyr (ca. AD 155)

He speaks of men and women who were 60 or 70 years old at that time, but who were “made disciples” in infancy, thus implying their baptism between AD 85-95.

Tertullian (AD 160-220)

Baptism was by immersion three times in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He believed that adult baptism was preferable to infant baptism. He also believed that certain sins were unforgivable after baptism, such as idolatry, murder, adultery, and fraud.

Irenaeus (AD 130-202)

He believed that infant baptism was derived from the apostles.

Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215)

Women missionaries were permitted to perform baptisms.

Late 2nd Century

Instructional classes for baptismal candidates were held. Hippolytus of Rome describes baptism as preceded by anointing with oil and a prayer for exorcism. The candidate for baptism was required to affirm the Apostles Creed. The baptism was followed by another anointing with oil expressing thanksgiving and the laying on of hands and prayer.

Origen (Early 3rd Century)

Infant baptism was usual in the churches and considered to be handed down by the apostles.

Early Christian Centuries

Sprinkling as a mode of baptism was especially used for the elderly, the sick and the infirm.

Until the End of the 4th Century

Adult and infant baptism were practiced side by side. By the 4th century, unbaptized infants were held to be lost; hence, nurses began baptizing infants at birth.

Late 4th Century

Some held that baptism only effected forgiveness for prior sins only. Thus, many waited to be baptized until they were old or at the point of death.

Paulicians (6th century and following)

Paulicians practiced believers baptism only. Baptismal candidates were instructed to kneel in the water and baptize themselves by taking water in their hands in order to pour it over their own heads.

First 12 Centuries

Baptism was widely practiced both by immersion and by pouring. Sprinkling was not as widespread.

13th Century

Sprinkling became the popular mode of baptism.

Waldensians (11th-16th centuries)

Waldensians practiced both adult and infant baptisms. They required that Roman Catholics be rebaptized, and when the Reformation arose, they required that Lutherans be rebaptized as well.

Swiss Brethren (16th century)

They required rebaptism.

The Reformers, Luther, Calvin & Zwingli

They all practiced infant baptism. Zwingli, however, did so reluctantly at first. Later, he appeared to change his stance and fully endorsed infant baptism.

Anabaptists

Anabaptists condemned both the Roman Catholics and also the Reformers. They rebaptized all converts, regardless of origin. They rejected infant baptism and they baptized by pouring three containers of water over the head.

Felix Manz (AD 1527)

A Protestant who was executed by other Protestants because he refused to endorse infant baptism; his execution was by drowning.

Early Mennonites and Baptists (late 16th century and on):

They practiced baptism by pouring.

Wesleys (18th century)

The Wesleys practiced both infant and adult baptism. They refused to rebaptize Anglicans, but they insisted on the rebaptism of Non-conformists.

Early Brethren Movement (1800s)

They practiced both infant and adult baptism.

Spurgeon (1800s)

Advocated believer's baptism only.

End of the 1800s

Some Baptists could be expelled from their churches for even attending an infant baptismal service.

Oneness Pentecostalism (AD 1914 –1916)

A rift within early Pentecostalism developed over the baptismal formula. Oneness Pentecostals separated from all other Christians and demanded repaptism for salvation.

Roman Catholics

Unbaptized infants cannot go to heaven because of original sin.

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The Christian Meal of Thanksgiving and Sharing

The Christian practice of a ritual meal that symbolizes the spiritual realities of salvation in the Lord Jesus goes back to the earliest Christian communities. The modern terms for this ritual meal come directly from the New Testament itself. It is the “Eucharist”, from the Greek verb *eucharisteo*, which means to give thanks (Mt. 26:27; Mk. 14:23; Lk. 22:17, 19; 1 Co. 11:24).⁸⁰ It is the “communion”, from the Greek noun *koinonia*, which means sharing or fellowship (1 Co. 10:16). It is the “Lord’s Table” (Lk. 22:21, 30; 1 Co. 10:21). While the various terms have distinct nuances, they all may be used interchangeably to refer to the same ritual. However, though most Christians celebrate this ritual meal, they do not do so in the same manner nor with the same understanding.

The Old Testament Contributions to the Christian Holy Meal

The origin of the Christian Eucharist has important roots in the world of the Old Testament. Of first importance is the idea that great historical events can be relived and reenacted in religious ritual. This is perhaps most clearly to be seen in the way Israel participated in covenant renewal, a periodic reaffirmation of the faith of Sinai. In the Plains of Moab, the second generation of Israelites renewed their covenant with Yahweh by rehearsing the Torah handed down from Moses (Dt. 1:1-5; 4:1-2, 44-46; 5:1). It is especially to be noted that this covenant renewal was to make real to the new generation the events of Sinai, even though the new generation had not been there. Their parents, who had stood at the foot of Sinai to hear the voice of Yahweh, were now dead (Dt. 2:14-15). Nevertheless, Moses declared to this second generation that it was not with their fathers that Yahweh had spoken face to face out of the mountain. It was with them (Dt. 5:2-5; 11:1-7)!

This concept of the reliving of an historical event through ritual underlies the practice of all ritual. It was the responsibility of every Israelite in every age to identify himself with his ancestors and to participate in memory and faith in their ancestors’ experience of God’s acts. Still later, in the covenant renewal at the Shechem pass, Yahweh could say to a people who had never seen Egypt, “I brought *you* out” (Jos. 24:5). “You saw with your own eyes what I did to the Egyptians,” God declared (Jos. 24:7). Future covenant renewals had the same basic

⁸⁰ A more direct source for the transliteration is the noun *eucharistia* that appears in the Greek text of 1 Co. 10:16 in Codex Bezae (D) of the 5th or 6th century as well as in a number of other early Christian documents, cf. Bauer, Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979) 328-329.

purpose, to make vivid and real for a present generation the ancestral relationship between Yahweh and his ancient people (cf. 2 Kg. 23:1-3).

Covenant Meals in the Ancient Near East

Covenant was the basic social contract of the ancient Near East, and most frequently it was the basis for human relationships that were not kinship ties. While some covenants were of the suzerainty type (between a superior and an inferior), others were of the parity type (between equal parties bound by an oath). The practice of sealing covenants with a common meal was widespread, and it is reflected in several of the covenants described in the Old Testament (Ge. 26:28-31; 31:51-54; 2 Sa. 3:17-21).⁸¹ The meal was considered to be eaten “before God” (Ex. 18:9-12).⁸² So, also, the covenant of Yahweh with Israel at Sinai was sealed by a covenant meal (Ex. 24:9-11). When the instructions were given for a covenant renewal ritual to be performed after the conquest of Canaan, a ritual later fulfilled in the Shechem Pass between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim (Jos. 24), the sacrifices of fellowship offerings before Yahweh were to be accompanied by a covenant meal (Dt. 27:1-8). Finally, it is significant to observe that the phrase “the Lord’s table”, which is so familiar in Christian ranks, originates in the Old Testament where the sacrificial altar is so-called in both the Hebrew as well as the Greek texts (Mal. 1:7).

The Passover

Given the concept that past events could be relived in ritual and that covenants were often sealed with a covenant meal, it comes as no surprise to find that the exodus, the redemptive event leading up to the Sinai covenant, was celebrated with a sacred meal and thereafter memorialized annually by a ritual meal (Ex. 12:1-28). By the time of Jesus, the Passover celebration was one of the three primary annual festivals for the Jews, a festival that swelled the temporary population of Jerusalem to between 2 1/2 and 3 million participants.⁸³

The Preparation and Sacrifice

The family ritual at Passover relived the event of the exodus.⁸⁴ On the

⁸¹ Westermann, *Genesis 12-36*, trans. J. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985) 429; G. Mendenhall, “Covenant,” *IDB* (1962) 1:714-723.

⁸² J. Hyatt, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 190, 257-258

⁸³ Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, VI:ix.3; II:xiv.3.

⁸⁴ The description of the rituals used in the days of Jesus may be found in A. Edersheim, *The Temple* (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 219ff.; J. Rylaarsdam, “Passover,” *IDB* 3 (1962) 664-665; R. Stewart, “Passover,” *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1982) 882.

evening before Passover, a ritual search was made throughout the house with a lighted candle in order to find and remove all leaven so that the bread of Passover would be unleavened bread, the same kind eaten on that first Passover night in Egypt (Ex. 12:14-15, 17-20). A lamb was selected and carried to the temple by a representative of the family, usually the family head, where it was slaughtered and bled into gold and silver trays. The priests flayed and dressed the animals, tossing the blood against the great altar and burning the appropriate portions of fat as a sacrifice. Meanwhile, other Levites sang the Hallel (Psa. 113-118). Every first line in the Psalm was repeated by the people, and to every other line they responded with “*Hallelujah*” (= praise the Lord). When the animals had been dressed, each was wrapped in its own skin and returned to the family representative.

The Family Meal

Back at the home, the lamb was spitted and roasted. The meal was served on low tables with the family members reclining on cushions around it and dressed in festive white. The structure of the meal revolved around four cups of red wine, the number four possibly representing the four words describing the exodus event (“bringing out”, “delivering”, “redeeming”, “taking”). After the opening blessing, the meal commenced with the first cup of wine followed by the first washing of hands and an initial sharing of herbs with each family member. The table was then cleared.

In the next part of the ritual, a designated son of the family asked the ceremonial question, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” To this, the family head would respond by a recitation of the national history, beginning with the creed of Dt. 26:5-11 and ending with a prayer for redemption from the power of Rome. The dishes of food were brought back, and part of the Hallel was sung. After the second cup of wine, the bitter herbs and the lamb were eaten together. The bitter herbs were dipped in *harosheth*, a paste of mashed fruit and nuts. The bitter herbs recalled the bitterness of slavery in Egypt, while the sweet *harosheth* recalled the promise and hope for the future. Once more, the hands were washed, and an unleavened cake of bread was broken with thanksgiving, a symbol of the brokenness of poverty. Pieces of unleavened bread were dipped into the *harosheth* and eaten.

The third cup of wine, called the “cup of blessing”, was received with a blessing pronounced over it. Sharing the fourth cup of wine concluded the ceremony along with the singing of the remaining part of the Hallel.

The Great Messianic Banquet

One of the images held forth in prophetic literature is that of a great banquet

at the end of the world. This image first appears in Isaiah 25:6-8, where a gala feast is prepared for all peoples, a feast with the best of meats and the best of aged wines.⁸⁵ Allusions to it may be found elsewhere, however (cf. Zec. 14:16; Is. 65:13), and the idea is picked up in intertestamental Jewish apocalyptic literature as well as in the Qumran writings.⁸⁶

Rabbinic writings, too, express belief in the heavenly banquet at the end.⁸⁷ The ideal of the messianic banquet was preserved symbolically in the Passover ritual, where a cup was set aside for the messiah if he should come on that very night to bring about the deliverance of his people.⁸⁸

Jesus and Table Fellowship

Table fellowship, that is, the sharing of a meal together, held great symbolic value for the Jewish community of Jesus' day. To eat with non-Jews was particularly heinous, both because gentile food was not "clean", in the sense of kosher laws, and because gentiles were uncircumcised and therefore outside the covenant relationship with God. Such discrimination even became an issue in the post-Easter Christian communities (Ac. 11:3; Ga. 2:12). Given the Jews' punctilious concern for the maintenance of racial purity,⁸⁹ it is not surprising to read in the gospels that the social restrictions of table fellowship extended beyond racial differences to class and social differences as well. Jesus was censured by his Jewish peers for "eating with tax collectors and sinners" (Mk. 2:16; Mt. 9:11; Lk. 5:30). Tax collectors and customs officers were despised not only because of the natural animosity toward one who collects toll, but because their occupation involved them in breaking the laws on uncleanness and the laws of Sabbath. "Sinners", on the other hand, were not necessarily immoral people as much as the 'am ha-arets (= people of the land), Jews who did not belong to any theological sect and were content to ignore many of the stricter requirements of the Law.⁹⁰

Jesus seemed to have no compunctions about associating with such people.

⁸⁵ Isaiah 24:1--27:13 is a section often referred to by scholars as the "little apocalypse", because these chapters look beyond the events of Isaiah's day to the final judgment of Yahweh at the end of the world.

⁸⁶ D. Russell, *The Method and Message of Jewish Apocalyptic* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 294, 320.

⁸⁷ Russell, 30.

⁸⁸ R. Wallace, "Lord's Supper," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 652.

⁸⁹ Jews in the time of Jesus held to a hierarchy of value with respect to different classes and races, a hierarchy that evolved in the effort to maintain racial purity. Israelites who could prove pure ancestry were at the top, followed by those who engaged in despised trades, such as camel drivers, sailors, dung-collectors and tax-gatherers. Lower yet were Jewish slaves. The lowest level for Jews was made up of illegitimates, proselytes, freed (circumcised) gentile slaves from Jewish homes, foundlings and eunuchs. Outside the community of Israel, of course, there were pagans, gentile slaves, and Samaritans, cf. J. Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 271-358.

⁹⁰ D. Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 174.

He welcomed them and extended to them table fellowship (Lk. 15:2), so much so, that his detractors slandered him as being a glutton and a drunkard (Mt. 11:19; Lk. 7:34). He practiced such table fellowship not only at ordinary meals but also at festive meals.⁹¹

The Implicit Meaning of Jesus' Table Fellowship⁹²

In the ancient Near East, no less than today, table fellowship was an honor bestowed. It was an offering of peace, trust, brotherhood and forgiveness; it was the equal sharing of life. The invitation to join David's table, which was extended to the last survivor of the Saulide family, David's arch enemy, represented an end of hostilities (2 Sa. 9). The bringing of Jehoiachin to the royal table of the king of Babylon signified his rehabilitation (2 Ki. 25:27-30). In later times, the invitation to Silas, the supreme commander, to the table of Agrippa I implied forgiveness.⁹³

In Judaism there was an added implication, because table fellowship with another meant equal fellowship with God. Sharing the same broken bread indicated equal sharing in the blessing that the master of the house had spoken over the bread. Thus, when Jesus ate with tax-gatherers and sinners, his actions were not merely a gesture of social acceptance; they were an indication that these same people might be included in the community of salvation.

The Eschatological Meaning of Jesus' Table Fellowship

Not only did Jesus practice table fellowship in daily life, he used the concept of table fellowship as a central theme in his proclamation of the kingdom of God. Making use of the existing ideal of the great messianic banquet at the end of the world, Jesus promised that the patriarchs, the prophets and the gentiles would all recline together at table in the kingdom of God (Mt. 8:11; Lk. 13:28-29). The apostles would join them also (Lk. 22:30). The consummation itself would be like a great feast, and Jesus compared it to a wedding dinner (Mt. 22:1-14; 25:1-13) and to a festive banquet (Lk. 14:15-24). In Jewish thought, the metaphor of a great feast was a common picture of eschatological salvation. Thus, both in word and deed Jesus anticipated the future joy and fellowship of all God's people by extending to them table fellowship in the present.⁹⁴ Even now was the time of the bridegroom, and it called for joy and feasting, not abstinence (Mk. 2:18-19).

⁹¹ At ordinary meals, Jews sat at the table; at festive meals, they "reclined" (*katakeisthai*), as mentioned in the Greek text of Mk. 2:15 and the other synoptic parallels.

⁹² J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1971) 115-116.

⁹³ Silas behaved himself unwisely and was sent back to prison, but this in no way lessens the implications of table fellowship as a gesture of restoration, cf. Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews*, XIX:vii.1.

⁹⁴ G. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 75-76.

The Feeding Miracles

Twice in Jesus' ministry he miraculously fed multitudes. The first of these feedings is one of only a handful of stories recounted in all four gospels (Mk. 6:30-44; Mt. 14:15-21; Lk. 9:12-17; Jn. 6:5-13). The second is found in two gospels (Mk. 8:1-10; Mt. 15:32-39). In the first, Jesus took a lad's lunch of five loaves and two small fish and multiplied it among 5000 men plus women and children. In so doing, Jesus was effectively acting out his own parable in which the words were uttered, 'Come, for all things are now ready'. His miracle, far more than merely satisfying the physical need, held the deeper meanings that the new life of the kingdom and the invitation to the great messianic banquet were being given by the master of the eschatological meal. In each of the accounts of the feeding miracles, Jesus began the meal by giving thanks,⁹⁵ and in the synoptics it specifically mentions his breaking the bread.

Whether or not these feedings are intentionally recounted to provide a parallel with the later celebration of the Lord's Table in the Christian communities,⁹⁶ the fact remains that they certainly form a significant part of the background of Jesus' invitation to all to participate in God's saving grace, a grace that is repeatedly illustrated by the metaphor of the great messianic banquet. The rich symbolic significance of the first miracle is clearly indicated in John's gospel by the discussion that followed on the next day (6:22-24). In contrast to the crowd's materialism, Jesus pointed them toward the higher redemptive implications of the miracle's symbolism (6:26-29). Physical bread which removes hunger, whether manna in the desert or the multiplication of loaves and fishes, is not of ultimate significance. Rather, the physical bread points beyond itself to the spiritual bread from heaven, the Bread of Life, which Jesus claimed to be (6:30-40). Physical bread cannot eliminate death, but Jesus, the Bread of Life, overcomes death (6:43-58).⁹⁷ Not only so, but Jesus, the Bread of Life who gives eternal life, does so abundantly (cf. Jn. 10:10). Even after feeding the 5000 and the 4000 respectively, there were many baskets of fragments to spare.

The Last Supper

The Hebrew appreciation for ritual, the ancient Near Eastern significance of covenant meals, the Jewish celebration of Passover, the prophetic ideal of the great messianic banquet, and Jesus' repeated magnanimous gestures of table fellowship

⁹⁵ The usual verb used in the synoptics is *eulogeo* (= to bless) and in the Fourth Gospel it is *eucharisteo* (= to give thanks), though the latter also appears in Mt. 15:36.

⁹⁶ Some interpreters, for instance, understand the feedings to be specific foreshadowings of the Lord's Table, cf. R. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 289-295.

⁹⁷ We shall postpone until later any discussion of the sacramental significance of John 6.

all come together in the scene known by Christians as the Last Supper, the final meal which Jesus shared with his disciples on the eve of his death. The historical information concerning this meal comes to us from five New Testament sources, each of the four gospels and the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians. The fact that all four evangelists described the meal in detail suggests the importance they attached to it.

The Occasion

It is clear from the synoptic evangelists that the occasion of the last supper was a celebration of Passover (Mt. 26:17-19; Mk. 14:12-16; Lk. 22:7-12). However, there is some difference between the way the synoptic gospels handle the account and the way the Fourth Gospel describes it. In the synoptic gospels, the date is clearly the evening of the first day of unleavened bread, probably Thursday.⁹⁸ This was the day on which the Passover lamb was slaughtered and prepared. However, in the Fourth Gospel there is a quite specific statement to the effect that the crucifixion itself occurred on the day of preparation (Jn. 18:28; 19:14, 31), thus making the last supper occur on the evening *before* the Jews celebrated Passover.⁹⁹

Numerous attempts have been made to harmonize the apparently conflicting data. Perhaps Jesus celebrated Passover a day early since he knew he would die on Passover. Perhaps the last supper was a *kiddush*, a family fellowship meal not necessarily coincident with Passover. Perhaps the synoptic gospels are using a different calendar reckoning than the Fourth Gospel. There is evidence, for instance, that the Qumran community reckoned their dates differently than other Jews, and there are arguments to support the suggestion that the Pharisees and Saducees celebrated Passover on different days.¹⁰⁰ However the problem is to be resolved, the last supper seems to have been clearly associated with Passover, whatever the date of its occurrence.

⁹⁸ There is some debate regarding the actual day of Christ's crucifixion. Two alternative weekdays other than Friday have been proposed, Wednesday and Thursday, but neither has won the opinion of many scholars, cf. discussion in H. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977) 65-74. If Jesus were crucified on Friday, as most scholars agree, then the last supper occurred on the Thursday evening prior.

⁹⁹ It is to be noted that this question of dates has some significance with regard to Christian celebrations also. If the last supper occurred on Passover, then unleavened bread was used (and this pattern is followed in the Roman Catholic and most Protestant churches). However, if the last supper occurred on the day before Passover, then leavened bread was used (and this pattern is followed in the Eastern Orthodox Church), cf. M. Shepherd, Jr., "Last Supper," *IDB* (1962) III.73; L. Rosten, ed., *Religions in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963) 84.

¹⁰⁰ See discussion in I. Marshall, *Last Supper and Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 66-75; Hoehner, 76-90; Shepherd, 73; Wallace, 651.

The New Exodus Motif

It is especially appropriate that Jesus' final meal with the disciples be a Passover celebration inasmuch as his whole life was the embodiment of a new Moses, a new Israel and a new exodus. Like Israel, he came out of Egypt (Mt. 2:13-15). He chose 12 heads to represent the new community of faith, passed through the waters in his baptism, sojourned and was tempted in the desert for 40 days, announced the law from a mountain (Mt. 5-7), was completely successful in the holy war of conquest over the powers of evil (Lk. 11:17-20), received adoration as the Son of David, was honored by Moses and Elijah, the law and the prophets respectively, was rejected in Jerusalem as were the prophets, and suffered the bitterness of exile in his death as the Servant of Yahweh. Luke is well within the mark when he records Moses and Elijah speaking to Jesus about his "exodus" (Lk. 9:31).¹⁰¹ So, also, is Paul when he views Christ as the Christian Passover lamb (1 Co. 5:7). The ancient meaning of the Passover suggested the true identity of Jesus. He was the embodiment of all that ancient Israel had been in her past, and he was the beginning of a new community of faith that drew its primary symbols from the old community. The old community was bound to the old covenant, the new community to the new covenant.

The Farewell Character of the Meal

Besides the Passover significance of the last supper, Jesus' final meal with his disciples was also a farewell meal, a meal he wished to share with them "before he suffered" (Lk. 22:15). The meal took place under the shadow of death, a death that the disciples had not yet fully understood (Mt. 16:21-23; Lk. 24:19-21). In the extensive discourses accompanying the meal and immediately following in the Fourth Gospel, the farewell character of the meal is repeatedly emphasized (Jn. 13:1, 33, 36-38; 14:2-3, 18-19, 25, 27-29; cf. 16:5-7, 16-22, 28; 17:11, 13). Jesus was going away, both in terms of death and in terms of returning to the Father. The meal represented the final act of fellowship, at least in the sense to which they had been accustomed.

The Symbolic Actions at the Meal

There was no wasted motion at the last supper; every movement counted. Once more it is to be noted that there are differences between the synoptics and the Fourth Gospel. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, there is the gesture of breaking bread and distributing wine at the meal, gestures accompanied by important explanations.

¹⁰¹ The Greek word rendered "departure" (NIV) or "decease" (KJV) is the word *exodos*, used in the LXX to refer to Israel's liberation from Egypt.

These are absent in John, but instead, the Fourth Gospel describes an action of servanthood in which Jesus washed his disciples' feet.

Washing Feet

Washing feet was not normally a part of the Passover ceremonies, although it was a normal feature of eastern hospitality. Usually, it would have been done when the guests had first arrived, not at some point after the meal had begun (Jn. 13:2a). Thus, its placement during the meal singles it out as something extraordinary. Furthermore, the washing of feet was usually the task of a slave, making it all the more striking that Jesus should perform it.¹⁰² Stripping for his task (Jn. 13:4), Jesus demonstrated that in the kingdom of God the roles are reversed. Even the Lord himself became a servant.

The Thanksgiving and Distribution of the Cup and Bread

As was customary at Passover meals, Jesus, the host of the meal, took the wine and the bread, giving thanks for them on behalf of all the guests present. He distributed the wine and broke and distributed the bread to each. While these actions seem clearly to have occurred within the normal Jewish Passover liturgy, it is not completely clear which part of the ceremony the synoptic gospels are emphasizing. Most interpreters opt for the third or fourth cup of wine as the one described in all three synoptic gospels, though Luke's account may reflect more than one of the ceremonial cups (Lk. 22:17-20).

Dipping the Bread

All four gospels comment on the treachery of Judas Iscariot (Mt.26:14-16; Mk.4:10-11; Lk. 22:1-6; Jn. 13:2). So also, all four gospels indicate that Jesus was aware of Judas' treachery (Mt. 26:21; Mk. 14:18; Lk. 22:21-22; Jn. 13:10-11, 18, 21). Jesus used the gesture of dipping the bread and giving it to Judas to indicate to John (and Peter) the identity of the betrayer (Jn. 13:21-26).

The Eucharistic Words of Jesus

Most important were the explanations that Jesus gave to his symbolic actions.

"I am among you as one who serves"

Both in the action of washing feet and in reprimanding the disciples for their dispute over greatness, Jesus emphasized his role of servanthood (Lk. 22:24-27; Jn. 13:12-17). Although he was the host of the meal, Jesus did not elevate his status

¹⁰² B. Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 446-447.

but condescended to those beneath him in rank.

“I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment”

About both the food (Lk. 22:16) and the wine (Mt. 26:29; Mk. 14:25; Lk. 22:18) Jesus stated that he would abstain from eating again until a future time. This future time is variously described as “until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God”, “until the kingdom of God comes”, and “until I drink it new with you in the kingdom of God”. Such phrases all anticipate the great messianic banquet at the end, when Christ once again shall share in table fellowship with his people. Although in different language, Paul’s anticipation is the same when he speaks of “proclaiming the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Co. 11:26).

“This is my body which is broken for you”

The broken bread, normally symbolic of the brokenness of poverty in the Jewish liturgy, now refers to the breaking of the body of Jesus in his death. As the bread has been broken, so Jesus will himself be broken on the cross.

“This cup is the new covenant in my blood”

The wine represented the blood of Jesus that was poured out for the forgiveness of the many. The idea of “the many” is the idea of corporate solidarity, that is, the collected body of people as opposed to the single person. It is an idiomatic Jewish expression for the whole community, and in this case, probably indicates the whole messianic community or the community of faith.¹⁰³ The reference to blood is a synecdoche referring to the upcoming violent and sacrificial death of Jesus.¹⁰⁴

In both Luke and Paul, the word covenant is modified by the adjective “new”, thus connecting it with Jeremiah’s promise of God’s eschatological covenant of forgiveness (Je. 31:31, 34). The phrase “blood of the covenant”, found in Mark and Matthew, recalls the language of the old covenant made at Sinai (Ex. 24:8). The fact that the new covenant is established through a sacrificial death makes it definable in covenant terms inasmuch as the Hebrew concept of covenant-making was essentially conceived in terms of bloodshed, hence, the common Hebrew idiom to “cut a covenant”. In this blood covenant of forgiveness, represented by the wine, Jesus was binding himself to the community of faith as represented by the 12 apostles reclining around him.

¹⁰³ See the “Appended Note: ‘The Many’” in C. Mann, *Mark [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1986) 416-420, 579.

¹⁰⁴ In a synecdoche, the part is used for the whole, and this particular synecdoche is typical of both OT and NT thought, cf. L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 112-128.

“Do this in remembrance of me”

In the accounts of Paul and Luke, this phrase is another reorientation. While the Passover meal was originally intended to recall the ancient deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt, Jesus now indicates that the emblems of the meal are to refer to him. Such a reorientation, especially when associated with sacrificial blood and the idea of forgiveness, suggests that Jesus himself is the sacrificial lamb who protects his people from judgment and death.

“The hand of him who betrays me is with me on the table”

In the indication of betrayal by one of the Twelve, there is an ominous shadow that falls over the last supper. It is a reminder that sharing at the table with Jesus does not equal true membership in the kingdom of God, even though the invitation is freely given. The full extent of the community of faith cannot be discerned by external means or external rituals. It can only be determined by the Lord himself, who knows the hearts of all.

Celebration in the Early Christian Communities

One of the striking things about the fact that the early Christian communities regularly celebrated the last supper is that, unlike baptism, there is no clear mandate for such a celebration recorded in the gospels.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, it is clear that the early Christians did celebrate the last supper. Perhaps Jesus instructed his apostles to so observe it, though if this is so, it is remarkable that such an instruction is not recorded. Perhaps the apostles themselves may have considered this celebration appropriate due to the heritage of the Jewish Passover, the teachings of Jesus regarding the great messianic banquet, and the deep impression made upon them at the last supper and at their post-Easter meals with Jesus. Certainly the celebration of the last supper in the church has apostolic authority behind it and probably the authority of Jesus as well.

The Post-Easter Meals with Jesus

One thing that may have significantly contributed to the regular practice of the Christian celebration of a meal with Jesus was the fact that Jesus continued to share table fellowship with his disciples after his resurrection. On resurrection evening, Jesus was recognized by Cleopas and his companion when, in his

¹⁰⁵ The phrase “do this in remembrance of me” in Luke and Paul is not necessarily a mandate. It may refer to nothing more than that the disciples were to understand the Last Supper itself as pointing to Christ rather than the traditional meaning as only as a memorial of the exodus.

characteristic fashion, he “took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them” (Lk. 24:30-31, 35). Jesus’ immediate disappearance after the breaking and distribution of the bread added an element of mystery that was long remembered. It is worth noting the vocabulary that Jesus “disappeared from their sight” (NIV)¹⁰⁶ which is not necessarily the same thing as a leaving. Similarly, when Paul says that Jesus “appeared” (NIV)¹⁰⁷ to Peter, the Twelve, five hundred brothers, James and himself, it is not necessarily the same thing as a coming (1 Co. 15:5-8). The element of mystery at the Lord’s table is that while he is not seen, he is truly there. To see Christ no more does not mean that he is not present--only that the nature of his presence is different now than previously.

Jesus’ appearance to the apostles on resurrection evening was “while they were eating” (Mk. 16:14),¹⁰⁸ and he even joined them by eating a piece of broiled fish (Lk. 24:41-43). On the shores of the Sea of Galilee, some days later, Jesus appeared to seven disciples and prepared a breakfast of bread and fish for them (Jn. 21:9, 12-13). It was while Jesus was eating with them on another occasion that he instructed them to wait in Jerusalem for the baptism with the Holy Spirit (Ac. 1:4-5).¹⁰⁹ These post-Easter meals were so impressive to the disciples that Peter, when later testifying to a gentile soldier that Jesus was alive, asserted that his resurrection was verified “by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead” (Ac. 10:41).

Breaking Bread

It is generally agreed by scholars that the phrase “breaking bread”, as used by Luke (Ac. 2:42, 46; 20:7, 11), denotes the celebration of the Lord’s table. It is categorized with other religious expressions of the new faith, such as prayer, teaching and fellowship, and later it is attached to the Christian gatherings on the first day of the week. Certainly the Corinthian church celebrated the Lord’s table (1 Co. 10:16; 11:26). That the celebration continued in the post-apostolic church is clear from the various references to it in the *Didache* (ca. AD 100-120)¹¹⁰ and in the

¹⁰⁶ More precisely, the Greek expression *aphantos* means he became invisible.

¹⁰⁷ The passive voice of *horao*, as used here, means to become visible.

¹⁰⁸ While it is doubtful if the longer ending of Mark’s gospel (Mk. 16:9-20) is part of the original document, it nevertheless may represent authentic, though independent, tradition. It was canonized with the rest of Mark and has been used by the church ever since, cf. W. Wessel, “The Ending of the Gospel of Mark,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. F. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8.791-793.

¹⁰⁹ Not all English versions render the word *synalizo* as a reference to eating since the verb can also mean “to assemble”, but if the former expression is the correct translation (as followed by NIV, RSVmg, NASBmg, ASVmg, JB, Lamsa, Knox, Phillips), then the scene fits well into the general practice of the post-Easter meals.

¹¹⁰ *Didache*, IX and X.

writings of Ignatius (AD 30-107),¹¹¹ Justin Martyr (AD 110-165),¹¹² Irenaeus (AD 120-202)¹¹³, and others.

The Traditional Language and Actions of Eucharist

Inasmuch as the celebration of the Lord's table was regularly practiced by Christians, the language and gestures associated with this event eventually became standardized. In early Christianity, a number of religious expressions were retained in their Hebrew or Aramaic original languages and are so written in the New Testament, such as, *amen* (this expression appears in every New Testament document except Acts, James and 3 John), *hallelujah* (Re. 19:1, 3, 4, 6), *abba* (Ro. 8:15; Ga. 4:6), *maranatha* (1 Co. 16:22), and *anathema* (1 Co. 12:3; 16:22). The eucharistic phrase "cup of blessing", used by Paul, is Jewish and comes from the Jewish Passover liturgy (1 Co. 10:16). In the mid-second century, Justin Martyr wrote concerning the food of the Lord's table, "This food is called among us *Eucharist*...."¹¹⁴ In a more modern way, many English churches have retained the Greek form of the word "thanksgiving" (*Eucharist*) from the New Testament without changing it over into English.

However, even apart from the retention of original language forms, there are sayings as well as actions associated with the Eucharist that seem to be standardized. Paul, for instance, says that he received such sayings and actions by tradition and was passing them on as tradition (1 Co. 11:23)¹¹⁵. These expressions and actions form striking parallels when juxtaposed in the gospels and in Paul.¹¹⁶

Actions:

Taking bread

Giving thanks

Breaking/distributing the bread

Taking the cup

Giving thanks

¹¹¹ *To the Philadelphians*, IV.

¹¹² *First Apology*, LXVI.

¹¹³ *Against Heresies*, V.ii.2-3.

¹¹⁴ *First Apology*, LXVI.

¹¹⁵ The Greek verbs *paralambano* (= to receive) and *paradidomi* (= to pass on), especially when used together, imply the passing on of tradition, cf. F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 86-87.

¹¹⁶ A fuller analysis of the Greek text can be found in J. Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. N. Perrin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977) 111-112, 163-165.

*Giving/receiving the cup**Sayings:*

I say to you I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until I drink it new in the kingdom of God.

This [bread] is my body which is given for you.

This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this in remembrance of me.

Celebration in the Corinthian Church

The celebration of Eucharist in the Corinthian church deserves special attention, both because it is the earliest datable description in the New Testament (mid-50s) and because the special problems associated with the Corinthian celebration caused Paul to discuss aspects of the Eucharist not dealt with elsewhere in the New Testament. There are two parts to Paul's discussion. The first is connected to the larger question of whether or not it is permissible for Christians to eat meat devoted to a pagan deity. The second is connected to a discussion of appropriate worship patterns in the assembled congregation.

The Lord's Table and the Table of Demons

One of the questions addressed by Paul to the Corinthians concerned the eating of food that had been offered to the gods in a pagan temple. Often enough, meat in ordinary shops had come from such temples. Since only a portion of the meat was eaten ceremonially by the pagan worshiper, and the rest was sold to the butchers for public consumption, Christians ran the risk of purchasing such meat in the market.¹¹⁷ Paul reassures his readers that since idols are not real gods in any case, the eating of such meat is not in itself wrong (1 Co. 8:4-6). However, since not everyone knows this, the Christian must take care not to destroy the faith of some who might misunderstand the eating of such meat (1 Co. 8:7-13).

The goal of the Christian life is to live in a constructive and beneficial way (1 Co. 10:23-24). Thus, Paul concludes that Christians need not be overly fussy about the matter. They may without qualms eat meat sold in the market (1 Co. 10:25-26), and they may without qualms eat in the homes of unbelievers (1 Co. 10:27). However, if it is specifically pointed out to them that the meat they are about to eat has been devoted to a pagan god, then they ought to refrain, not so much for their own conscience as much as for the one who brought the matter to their attention (1

¹¹⁷ M. Thrall, *I and II Corinthians* (Cambridge: University Press, 1965) 61-65.

Co. 10:28-33).

It is in the midst of such a context that Paul refers to the Lord's table and warns the church against the sin of idolatry. Here he refers to the participation in a feast which is specifically under the patronage of a pagan deity, a feast that would naturally involve the participant in the acknowledgement and worship of the pagan god. As such, this portion of his discussion is to be distinguished from what was previously mentioned regarding meat bought in the market or eaten at an unbeliever's home.¹¹⁸ Calling on the Corinthians' own sense of logic, he points out the incompatibility of eating sacrificial food in honor of a pagan god and eating the ritual meal of the Lord's table.

The force of his argument is significant in that it amplifies the concept of the real presence of Christ at the communion and the real spiritual union of the assembled participants. Paul uses the word *koinonia* (= sharing or fellowship) to describe this participation. Those participating in the communion ritual share in the death of Jesus and in the body of Christ. Here, as before, the word "blood" is a synecdoche for death, and the phrase "body of Christ" refers to that mystical union that brings the believer together with Christ as well as with all other believers (1 Co. 10:16; cf. 12:12-13, 27). Such unity is symbolized by the single loaf shared by all (1 Co. 10:17).

The fact that believers encounter the real presence of Christ in the communion is supported by Paul's analogy of ancient Israel. In ancient Israel the priests, Levites and even ordinary worshipers were brought into real contact with Yahweh through the eating of sacrificial animals (Le. 7:11-21; 10:12-15; Nu. 18:8-19; Dt. 12:5-7, 15-18; 18:1-5).

Such meals were eaten "in the presence of Yahweh" (Dt. 12:7, 18). So also, if someone participated in the ritual meal at an idol's temple, he or she would be brought into contact with the demons who stand behind such pagan idols. Similarly, Christians who participate in the Lord's table encounter his real presence also. Paul's argument is that it is inappropriate to attempt to share the real presence of Christ and God in the communion and at the same time share the real presence of demons. This is especially true since Christians confess that there is only one God, the Father, and one Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Co. 8:6). The worship of Christ and the worship of demons are not compatible.

Because in the Christian ritual meal the believer confronts the real presence of Christ, the ritual itself can be described with phrases such as "the Lord's table" and "the cup of the Lord". The ritual is a real sharing with the invisible Christ who is

¹¹⁸ F. Bruce, *I & II Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 96.

present. His mysterious presence vividly recalls the mystery of his post-resurrection appearances and disappearances.

Corinthian Abuse and Paul's Instructions on Celebrating the Lord's Table

In addition to the problem of eating questionable food, Paul also addressed the problem of Corinthian abuse at the Lord's table. Many scholars distinguish between the fellowship meal (an *agape*, or love feast, of Jude 12) and the Lord's table. The love feast was apparently a Christian meal designed for fellowship, and especially, for charity to the poor and the widows of the Christian community. There are hints of it in the New Testament as well as in the writings of the Apostolic Fathers.¹¹⁹ It is not unlikely that these two meals were held at the same time and are therefore related in Paul's directives. At least it is certain that Paul's discussion involves both the appeasing of hunger as well as the sacramental celebration.¹²⁰ Essentially, the problem was that there was a contradiction between the practice of the Corinthians and the meaning of Eucharist. Eucharist was intended to express the union of the church in Christ, and the Corinthians were observing it in a way that destroyed this unity.

Partyism (1 Co. 11:17-19)

Woven throughout the first Corinthian letter are frequent references to the fact that the Corinthian congregation was severely divided over various issues. There was partyism over leadership (1:10-17; 3:21-23), dissension over Paul's proposed visit (4:18-21), disputes over legal rights (6:1-8), arguments over ethics (6:12-20; 8:1-3), and arrogance over the manifestation of certain charismatic gifts (12:29-31). It is this spirit of partyism that destroyed the meaning of Eucharist, so much so, that Paul said their meetings did more harm than good.

Love versus Selfishness (1 Co. 11:20-22)

The *agape* meal at Corinth did not reflect the spirit of Christian love, nor could the Corinthians' celebration legitimately be called the Lord's supper. Instead of everyone sharing equally, the wealthy either ate in exclusive little groups or else ate early so as to avoid sharing with the poor and the slaves of the congregation. Slaves, more than others, would have had a difficult time arriving early. It was emphatically not a *koinonia*, and it was a travesty on *agape*. The drunken rich had more than enough, and the hungry poor were unsatisfied and embarrassed.

¹¹⁹ Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans*, 8:2; *Didache*, 9-10; and others, of. M. Shepherd, Jr., "Agape, The," *IDB* (1962) I:53-54.

¹²⁰ H. Conzelmann, *History of Primitive Christianity*, trans. J. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973) 52.

Participating in an Unworthy Manner (1 Co.11:27-34)

The KJV rendering of this passage with the word “unworthily” (11:27) has had a decidedly unfortunate effect upon interpretation. For many, this has been taken to mean that one must measure up to some sort of sanctimonious standard so as to earn the right to participate in the Lord’s table. This is hardly Paul’s meaning, since no one can ever be worthy of the grace of God in Christ. More recent English versions have done well to translate the word *anaxios* (= carelessly) as “in an unworthy manner” (NIV, RSV, ASV, NASB). This unworthy manner that Paul rebukes certainly includes the raw selfishness described earlier. To exhibit such selfishness and then to participate in the symbols of union in Christ is, in effect, to desecrate or profane the body of Christ and his shed blood (cf. Ac. 7:52; He. 6:6; 10:29).

Each participant ought to first engage in self-examination to insure that the right motives inwardly and the right actions outwardly demonstrate that he or she is approaching Christ with reverence and in an appropriate manner.¹²¹ If one takes the precaution for self-examination, he or she will not come under God’s judgment. However, to participate in the Lord’s table in an irreverent manner, or particularly, while exhibiting partyism, resentment and dissension in the community of faith, is to call down upon oneself the discipline of God, a discipline that might even result in death. Apparently this very thing had happened in Corinth. God had sent the discipline of disease and, in some cases, death came as a result of the Corinthians’ disrespect.

In giving these directives, Paul speaks of “recognizing the body of the Lord”, that is, understanding and appreciating the fact that in Christ there is union for all believers, regardless of race, class or sex (cf. 1 Co. 10:16-17; Ga. 3:26-28).¹²² If one truly discerns the corporate community of faith, he or she will gladly refrain from being piggish.

The Christian Meaning of Eucharist

It will be well to summarize the meaning of Eucharist as it comes to us from the Bible as well as how the data of the Bible have been interpreted by various

¹²¹ The post-apostolic church recognized the importance of this as well. In the *Didache*, it stipulates, “Let no man, having his dispute with his fellow, join your assembly until they have been reconciled” (XIV).

¹²² There is some disagreement between scholars over the exact meaning of the term “body” in 1 Co. 11:29, and it may be noted that the phrase “of the Lord” is not in the best manuscripts. While most agree that it does not refer to Christ’s actual body which ascended into the heavens, some see it as referring to the food of the communion itself, which has been consecrated as Christ’s body, while others see it referring to the church that is mystically Christ’s body. It has been taken in the latter sense here due to the context of dissension in the Corinthian church.

Christian traditions.

The Biblical Meaning

The New Testament meaning of Eucharist accumulates much of the meaning of certain Old Testament ideals. It implicitly embraces the Old Testament concept of ritual which reenacts an historical and sacred event, of meals as the sealing action of a covenant, of the Passover as the central celebration that relives Israel's primordial salvation event, and of the anticipation of a great messianic banquet in the end. The table fellowship of Jesus as a symbol of God's acceptance and forgiveness, both before and after his passion, contributes greatly to the meaning of Eucharist. However, it is the Last Supper with the Twelve that provides the most important meaning, for at the Last Supper the meaning of Eucharist is not merely implicit but explicit in the words and actions of Jesus. Paul, also, adds to the inner meaning of the Christian meal in his theological discussion to the Corinthians.

There is, however, one other important New Testament document that should be addressed in this regard, and that is the Fourth Gospel. A fair amount of controversy has arisen over just how the evidence of the Fourth Gospel should be read.

Interpreting the Strange Omission

It already has been noted that John's gospel contains no mention of the eucharistic words or actions of Jesus, even though John records the Last Supper of Jesus with the Twelve. Some interpreters see this as an intentional omission that serves as a warning against the dangers of externalism. In other words, while the Fourth Gospel contains eucharistic themes (the sermon on the Bread of Life, 6:26-58; the teaching on the Vine, 15:1-17), John has used them as reinforcements of the internal response of the believer to Christ rather than as external symbols.¹²³ Other interpreters suggest that John takes for granted his readers' understanding of baptism and Eucharist as institutions, but instead, finds unique ways to address the inner meaning of these rituals. As such, he artfully refers to the Eucharist in the miracle of turning water into wine in order to suggest that Christ alone can make the wine of Eucharist meaningful (2:1-11). He recounts the feeding of the 5000, explicitly using the verb *eucharisteo* (6:11) as paralleling the words of institution. He records Jesus' words concerning eating his flesh and drinking his blood to emphasize that the central meaning of Eucharist is faith (6:29, 32-33, 35, 40, 47-48, 50-51, 53-58). He records the allegory of the vine to indicate that the true wine

¹²³ The omission of the eucharistic words and actions of Jesus are not the only omissions in the Fourth Gospel. Also omitted are direct references to Jesus' baptism, as found in the synoptic gospels (1:29-39). To this should be added the fact that Jesus did not himself participate in baptizing others, though his disciples did (3:22; 4:1-2).

of communion is received by being faithfully united with Christ so as to bear fruit (15:1-17).¹²⁴

What Does John Intend?

It would seem that there are some valid points made by both sides as well as some over-interpretation. In the first place, the omission of the eucharistic words and actions of Jesus may not be unusual in that much of the Fourth Gospel records unique stories about Jesus not found in the synoptics and vice versa. Thus, such an omission need not be interpreted as anti-sacramental, though it might well enough serve to warn against an overemphasis of the externals of ritual. It does seem probable that there is some implicit reference to Eucharist, at least in the sermon on the bread from heaven, though it is less clear that the wedding in Cana and the allegory of the vine have a eucharistic meaning. The community that first read the Fourth Gospel would undoubtedly have recognized a parallelism between the eucharistic words of Jesus, "This is my body which is given for you," as found in Paul and the synoptic gospels, and such Johannine words as, "This bread is my flesh which I give for the life of the world" (6:51).

In summary, then, the biblical meaning of Eucharist as it comes to us through the documents of the Old and New Testaments may be set down as follows:

From the OT:

Eucharist is....

- ... a reenactment of a salvation event
- ... the celebration of the sealing of a covenant
- ... an anticipation of the messianic banquet

From the Meals of Jesus:

Eucharist is....

- ... a remembering of the table fellowship of Jesus with its overtones of God's acceptance and forgiveness
- ... a sharing in the mystery of Christ's resurrection appearances in which he ate and drank with his disciples

¹²⁴ It may be noted that the same sort of interpretations are suggested with reference to baptism in the teaching on new birth (3:3-5), the teachings on the water of life (4:1-14; 7:37-38; cf. 19:34) and the washing of the disciples feet (13:2-17), see discussion in R. Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1976) 105-108.

From the Last Supper:

Eucharist is....

- ... a recognition that the true Passover lamb is Jesus himself
- ... a recognition that the body of Christ was broken for us
- ... a recognition that the blood of Christ was shed for us
- ... a warning that loyalty to Christ is not to be judged merely by appearances
- ... an affirmation that the primary role of the believer is servanthood
- ... a remembrance that the one who bade farewell to his followers promised to return
- ... an anticipation of the coming of Christ when all his disciples will share at table with him in the kingdom of God
- ... a celebration of the new covenant of forgiveness which was established in Jesus' death

From Paul:

Eucharist is....

- ... a recognition that just as there is a single loaf, all believers share equally in the body of Christ
- ... a genuine encounter with the risen Lord who shares with the church his table and his cup
- ... a warning against partyism, selfishness and disrespect

From John:

Eucharist is....

- ... an act of faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ
- ... a participation by faith in the eternal life that Christ gives
- ... a warning that the essence of faith is in relationship to Christ, not in ritual alone

The Interpretation of the Church

While virtually all Christians celebrate the Lord's Table,¹²⁵ the interpretations of the Christian meal have been various. Following are some of the major variations.

The Sacraments

In the 4th century Augustine defined "sacrament" as a visible sign of an invisible reality or grace, a definition generally accepted by both Protestants and Roman Catholics. Both Protestants and Roman Catholics equally accept Eucharist as a sacrament under the above definition. However, they do not agree on how that invisible reality or grace is imparted. Roman Catholics regard the ritual as the actual channel through which God's grace comes. Protestants, on the other hand, believe that divine grace is truly received only by an active faith. For Roman Catholics, the elements of the ritual, the bread and wine, are infused with God's grace. For Protestants, the elements of the ritual point toward and announce God's grace but do not carry this grace in and of themselves.

Transubstantiation

Since the post-apostolic church, the sacramental elements of bread and wine have been called the body and blood of the Lord after the eucharistic words of Jesus¹²⁶. However, in the 9th century, a teaching developed that a miracle took place when the words of institution were repeated, a miracle in which the elements were actually changed into the literal flesh and blood of Christ. In 1059 this view was declared to be the faith of the church, and at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, the term "transubstantiation", which described this view, became official. During the medieval church, corollaries were added to the view:

1. The body and blood of Christ are in each element so that when the cup is withheld from the congregation, the body and blood is received in the bread alone;
2. The high moment in the Eucharist is when the elements are changed into the very body and blood of Christ, an act performed by the priest alone;
3. The Eucharist is a propitiatory sacrifice offered to God;

¹²⁵ There have been a very few Christian groups which have not participated in the Lord's table, but these are so exceptional as to discourage discussion.

¹²⁶ Observe the following samples: "...one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ...", Ignatius, *Philadelphians*, IV (AD 30-107); "...the food which is blessed by the prayer is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh," Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, LXVI (AD 110-165); "He has acknowledged the cup as his own blood... and the bread he has established as his own body...", Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 11.2 (AD 120-202).

4. The host (consecrated elements) may be reserved for later use, and if so, the elements are to be venerated as the living Christ. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) confirmed these teachings, adding that the veneration of the host is the same as worship that is given to God.¹²⁷ Transubstantiation is the standard Roman Catholic teaching regarding the meaning of Eucharist.

Consubstantiation

The leaders of the Protestant Reformation all rejected the concept of transubstantiation, because it lacked biblical support, and some reformers even rejected the idea that there was any real presence of Christ in the supper at all. Martin Luther attempted to maintain a middle ground between two extremes. While emphatically rejecting the withdrawal of the cup from the laity, rejecting transubstantiation, and rejecting the notion of sacrifice in the supper, Luther still affirmed that Christ was bodily present in the Lord's supper, although his corporeal presence was a mystery. In this way, Luther was closer to the Roman Catholics than to those in the radical wing of the reformation. For Luther, the New Testament unambiguously said, "This is my body," and that is exactly what was meant. When asked how the bodily presence took place, Luther responded that he did not know and that it was not his place to ask. Later theologians called his view consubstantiation. The bread was still bread, but the body of Christ was mysteriously in it.¹²⁸

Announcement of Faith/Memorial¹²⁹

The Swiss Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, interpreted the statement, "This is my body," as a metaphor, that is, he took it to mean, "This bread *represents* my body." As such, he moved even further toward the radical wing of the reformation that denied any real presence of Christ in the communion. For Zwingli, the Eucharist was no more and no less than a thanksgiving and a common rejoicing of those who declare the historical death of Christ. It was an affirmation of faith by believers to their fellow believers.

The Anabaptists, the most radical wing of the reformation, also rejected the idea that the real presence of Christ was encountered in the communion. For them, the Lord's table was a symbol and a memorial only, a sign pointing toward an historical event.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ M. Osterhaven, "Lord's Supper, Views of," *EDT* (1984) 653-654.

¹²⁸ J. Gonzales, *A History of Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975) III.58

¹²⁹ Gonzales, III.73-76, 83.

¹³⁰ See discussion in Osterhaven, 655-656; J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge (Grand

John Calvin

Although somewhat later than Luther and Zwingli, Calvin's theology of the Eucharist interacted with the theology of both his predecessors. He rejected Luther's notion of the ubiquity of Christ (the idea that Christ's body is everywhere present rather than merely at the right hand of the Father), and he equally rejected Zwingli's memorialism. Instead, Calvin contended that there was indeed a real reception of the body and blood of Christ in the communion, only in a spiritual manner. Christ is truly there, and he truly feeds his people with his body and blood, though not merely by their ingesting the elements of the bread and wine. As such, Calvin was closer to Luther and more distant from Zwingli. Both Calvin and Luther agreed that there is a profundity in the communion with regard to Christ's body that may be accepted even though not understood. It is something that one experiences rather than something one fully understands.

Diversity in Practice

Beyond the inner meaning of Eucharist, there are differences in various traditions regarding the actual procedure for the meal. Here are some of the major ones:

- ♦ Eastern Orthodoxy uses leavened bread instead of unleavened bread.
- ♦ Many fundamentalist Protestant churches use grape juice instead of wine.
- ♦ Some congregations use a common cup, while others use individual cups.
- ♦ Some churches use bread or wafers already divided, while others break the bread during the ritual.
- ♦ Some churches celebrate the Lord's table each Sunday, while others celebrate it more infrequently.
- ♦ Some traditions allow communicants to decide for themselves when they are prepared to receive communion, while other traditions have guidelines that control this decision.
- ♦ Some congregations practice "closed" communion (closed to anyone who is not a member) and others practice "open" communion (open to all believers whether members or not).

These differences ought not to divide the church universal, since they are not precisely regulated in the New Testament. Whether leavened or unleavened bread was used is a matter of gospel interpretation, though if the Last Supper was indeed

a Passover meal, unleavened bread is likely to have been used. Wine was certainly used at Corinth (1 Co. 11:21), and while Paul does not forbid it, there is no real reason to demand it.¹³¹ The common cup suggests unity, but no more so than the common loaf. In fact, depending upon how the Lukan phrase is read, “Take this and divide it among you” (Lk. 22:17), individual cups may have been used even at the Last Supper. In the apostolic church, Eucharist may have been served as often as each day (Ac. 2:46), but Paul’s word *hosakis* (= as often as) is sufficiently ambiguous to prevent dogmatism (1 Co. 11:25-26). In the post-apostolic church, Eucharist was forbidden to the unbaptized,¹³² but this cannot be binding anymore than the preference in the same document that prefers baptisms, if possible, in cold and running water or stipulates that candidates must fast one or two days before being baptized.¹³³

Closed communions usually arise as a way of ensuring that no one participates who does not measure up to some moral or theological criteria. However, what such churches hope to gain in terms of purity they end up forfeiting in terms of the universality of the church. Thus, liberty should be granted in these areas so that the ritual does not become more important than the reality behind it--and that reality is the sacrificial work of Jesus our Lord!

¹³¹ In a few Pentecostal circles, wine is required because it is thought to have “life” in it through fermentation. This seems to be an inadequate reason. On the other hand, in some fundamentalist Protestant churches wine is forbidden due to a general stance of prohibition against alcoholic beverages, a position that is grounded in prohibitionism itself rather than in biblical exegesis.

¹³² *Didache*, IX.5.

¹³³ *Didache*, VII.2, 4.