

RETHINKING THE DESCRIPTION OF BAPTISM

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Introduction

The following presentation gives the author's understanding of Christian baptism even though it attempts to represent fairly a wider movement. What I am saying here may at first sound different to brethren from my background. That difference comes in part from the attention given to framework of thought and structure of presentation. We have tried to achieve wholeness, cohesiveness, and clarity by giving overt expression to our presuppositions. The difference comes also from the fact that there is some diversity in the movement, which is natural enough in a free-church heritage the size of this one. Unity through restoration assumes the desire to adjust toward a more New Testament understanding. Hopefully, this treatment will synthesize ideas and sharpen and improve what we believe and practice in regard to Christian baptism.

We attempt here not only to describe a viewpoint, but to provide biblical rationale for it and to contrast it with apparently foreign and incompatible alternatives. Such a task is formidable because so many doctrinal issues surface in connection with this ordinance, and so many tacit assumptions become visible in the practice of baptism.

I. The Interpersonal Nature of the Ordinances¹

A. The Interpersonal Nature of the Covenant

The nature of the new covenant sets the nature of its ordinances. When Jeremiah prophesied the coming of a covenant, he not only indicated that there would be another covenant, but that it would be another kind of covenant. It would not be like the one Yahveh made with Israel at Sinai after the exodus (31:31-34). This time God would write his law on the hearts of his people rather than on "*tables of stone*," as Paul later put it (2 Corinthians 3:7). Instead of an impersonal law that could be expressed on stone, a personal revelation and abiding influence were to come that persons would internalize "*in their hearts*." Every act that arises from a fundamental category participates in the nature of that category. In an interpersonal system baptism and communion are interpersonal.

We call the new covenant "interpersonal" because it addresses active relationship between persons in contrast to legal function, natural process, rational process, and so forth. Jeremiah's prophecy spoke of "knowing" the Lord. "Knowing" God means more than knowing about him or believing he exists because knowing about God does not especially bring in the sin problem and its solution. Sin is something that happens between persons relative to their shared values and purposes. The New Testament discussion of the covenant that came treats it in terms that belong to personal relationship, particularly in contrast to legal systems. Paul's familiar comments in Romans 3-4, Galatians 3, and elsewhere highlight the contrast between faith, grace, promise, reckoning, reconciliation, life, love, spirit, on one hand, and works, law, debt, flesh, on the other. Christian ordinances belong to a grace-faith covenant; so they are interpersonal.

B. The Interpersonal Purpose of the Covenant

The purpose of the covenant also sets the nature of its ordinances. Interpersonal consequences come from interpersonal antecedents. The result of the new economy would be fellowship: Yahweh would be their God and they would be his people. Their sins would no longer stand between them and him because he would no longer remember their sins against them (cp. Hebrews 8:6-10:18).² In the place where it was said they were not his people, they would be called sons of the living God (Hosea 1:10-11). They would have personal relationship.

After speaking of the new covenant in 2 Corinthians 3, Paul moves ahead in 5:17-21 to describe God's purpose in that covenant and in calling men to be his ambassadors. The apostle calls this work a "ministry of reconciliation" in which people are entreated to be reconciled to God through Christ. "Reconciliation" implies "alienation," and both terms address interpersonal matters. Estrangement ceases if the trespasses that caused it are removed. Sins are removed by no longer reckoning them against the sinner because he is in Christ, the Sinless One. The reconciling purpose of the new covenant establishes interpersonal meaning for its ordinances.

C. The Interpersonal Source of the Ordinances

Finally, the source of the ordinances sets the nature of the ordinances. The origin of any act determines its nature because an act has the character of what motivates it. Antecedent must be amenable to consequence. Acts are "after their kind" in keeping with the law of harvest: people reap what they sow (Galatians 6:7-9; cp. 5:13-25). What is born of flesh is flesh; what is born of spirit is spirit (John 3:6; cp. 1 Corinthians 15:50?). Likewise, what is of faith is faith. Since baptism and the Lord's Supper arise from faith, they have the character of faith—they are interpersonal.

II. The Interpersonal Character of Christian Baptism

A. Baptism as Personal Identification with Christ

The Great Commission sets the understanding of baptism by establishing its meaning at a broad level. Baptism identifies a person with Father-Son-Spirit (Matthew 28:19). According to several passages in Acts and the epistles, baptism identifies a person with the Lord Jesus (Acts 8:16; 10:48; 19:5; Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27). These statements parallel other expressions about identification with Moses (1 Corinthians 10:2), with Paul (1 Corinthians 1:13-14), and with John's baptism. The twelve in Ephesus who had been baptized into John's baptism were then baptized into Christ (Acts 19:2-5), which implies that the two baptisms have parallel significances, that is, parallel identifications. When people are in Christ, they are "new creatures [creations]" (2 Corinthians 5:17); they have a new identity along with everything that entails. Baptism is a **rite of passage** into Christ; it is an **initiatory rite** into a personal relationship with him; it is an **oath of induction** into a new identity. And so we move on to what that new identity encompasses.³

B. The Meaning of Personal Identification with Christ

1. Commitment to Christ

Identification with Christ implies meanings associated with that identification. Within the meaning of baptism lie certain implied commitments. In baptism a person commits himself to the values and purposes of Christ, values and purposes that transcend a material frame of reference. They are spiritual not fleshly, interpersonal not impersonal, centered above the individuals not in them. They stress invisible realities that are eternal, not visible ones that are temporary.

Living above a material lifestyle appears in two images associated with baptism. First, Paul pictures the transcendent orientation as a resurrected lifestyle (Romans 6) and ascended lifestyle (Colossians 2:12 + 3:1-17). The death, burial, resurrection, ascension of Jesus constitutes the most distinctive event in his life because he alone resurrected to heaven never to die again. Baptism appropriately identifies us with Jesus by loosely picturing that unique event. But baptism does more than dramatically re-enact what Jesus did. It makes a statement about what we are going to do and what we aspire to become. It is a performative act. Psychologically in baptism we crucify our fleshly orientation and bury it, and we adopt a higher orientation—a resurrected one, an ascended one that is “above all that.” Paul says we are “united with” Christ⁴ in this likeness of his death and resurrection. By “uniting” with him in baptism, we formally “identify” with him there, and our identity with him means we our “new creatures [creations].” Since baptism is immersion as to form, it bears a formal “likeness” to his death and resurrection.⁵ To sum up in one statement, baptism is a formal likeness of a historical analogy to a lifestyle transformation.

Adopting a transcendent lifestyle means starting over from that changed perspective. During his discussion with Nicodemus (John 3), Jesus pictures in a second way this starting over from above. He calls it rebirth, birth from above, birth from spirit rather than from flesh. He calls for a reborn lifestyle (3:19-21; cp. Titus 3:5), one concerned with faith (3:16ff) and spirit, not biological descent, national identity, or even physical life (John 3:13-15). Since baptism takes place in water, we are psychologically “born of water” when we commit to a new way of life in the higher kingdom (3:5), which is not of this world (18:36). “*Being born of water*” expresses a new identification with the spiritual values and transcendent purposes (cp. 2 Corinthians 5:16-17) of the Savior who is “*lifted up*” (3:14), as it were, and draws all nationalities to himself (John 3:16-17; 12:32).

As we are using the term here, identification means more than an appreciation for Christ or a sense of association with him. Identification involves commitment to him and his values and participation in his purposes and work. Baptism is a **pledge of allegiance** to Christ.

2. Consequences of commitment to Christ

In relation to a new interpersonal covenant, baptism arises from personal responses like trust and repentance, expresses identification with Jesus Christ, and by extension commitment to his values and purposes. Because of that (1) identity and its implied commitments, God (2) chooses to (3) give certain consequences we need. He chooses to fulfill his covenant promise to forgive sin, to give fellowship with his Spirit, and to add us to Christ’s body, the church. Two things stand between antecedent responses and consequent blessings:

identity with Christ and God's choice to fulfill previous promises. Furthermore, these consequences come to us by gift from the other Person.

Inside of being identified with Christ and committed to him lie the benefits of that new identity. Since baptism formally expresses the identification from which these benefits come, scripture can speak of those benefits in connection with baptism.

a. forgiveness of sins

Salvation is primarily reconciliation back into fellowship with God (2 Corinthians 5:17-21). Lostness means alienation from God because of personal sin. Salvation, then, means solving the sin problem. In the new covenant, God no longer remembers our sins against us. Salvation deals with sin more than sins because it deals with our overall *character* more than our individual acts and our estranged *state*, which by metonymy is called sin. We come to be considered righteous more than come to be righteous; we come to be considered righteous through identity with Christ who is righteous. Personal responses that identify us with Christ scripture associates with salvation itself. Since baptism stands among those responses, scripture connects it with forgiveness and salvation even though it is a formal act: "*He that believes and is baptized will be saved*" (Mark 16:16); "*Arise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name*" (Acts 22:16); "*. . . which after a true likeness now saves you—baptism*" (1 Peter 3:31). Similarly, John's baptism is directly associated with forgiveness in Mark 1:4 and Luke 3:3. In keeping with the fact that it relates to forgiveness of sin, baptism is like cleansing (Ephesians 5:26; Titus 3:5), and its element is water.

b. gift of the Spirit

On Pentecost Peter included "*the gift of the Spirit*" among God's gifts to those he commanded to identify with Christ through repentance and baptism. We understand the gift of the Spirit in this case to be the gift that the Spirit is rather than a gift that comes from him. Commonly called "*the indwelling gift of the Spirit*," this gift consists primarily of interpersonal relationship with God in the person of the Spirit because renewed relationship can accompany forgiveness of what brought alienation. No decision needs to be made at this level between natural and supernatural involvements. The natural-supernatural variable relates to particulars of each conversion and its setting. The expression "*gift of the Spirit*" evidently equals the other expressions "*baptism in the Spirit*" and "*earnest of the Spirit*."

c. membership in the body of Christ

The Acts 2, conversion includes God's adding together the increasing number of the ones being saved (2:41, 47). There is one baptism for both Jews and Gentiles who identify with the one Lord to create the one body—the "*new united mankind*" (Ephesians 4:4-6; 2:11-18). Those whom God adds to Christ's body are the same ones he saves and gives his Spirit. No intended distinction exists between the "invisible" and visible church—or, for that matter, between the universal church and local churches taken collectively. No distinction exists in the time or conditions for entering the one and the other. We enter the salvation of Christ and the body of Christ at the same time and on the same conditions.

All the individual responses people make combine to form one complex condition. No individual response within the general condition⁶ is anything more than conditionally appropriate to the consequences God provides. Baptism has no more, no less, and no other than this same kind of function. Repentant faith expressed in baptism identifies with Christ; identity with Christ is the condition for all consequences God gives. So to speak, *“identify with Christ and all these things will be added to you.”*

C. Observations on This Understanding of Baptism

1. Baptism has been associated here with the up-front whole rather than a subsequent part. We have identified baptism with the general level because **(a)** we believe scripture pictures baptism this way. Besides the several texts that speak simply of baptism into Christ, every time scripture mentions consequences in relation to baptism, it includes identification in the statement.⁷ In Acts 2:38 baptism *on the basis of the name of Jesus Christ* is unto remission of sins. In Acts 22:16 Paul should be baptized and wash away his sins, *calling on the name of the Lord*. In 1 Peter 3:21 baptism saves insofar as it is an *appeal to God* of/for a good conscience.

For practical purposes associating baptism with the big picture **(b)** lessens the tendency to causally connect it with consequences. Misconstruing the ordinance as a cause fosters the feeling that baptism is a token, discrete ritual that effects results.⁸ By focusing on the act itself, we may see it with legal eyes and misread the way it relates to consequences and other antecedents. Conceiving of an ordinance as a cause also conceives of it as operating under law, and the participant psychologically focuses on the process rather than on the person of God. He makes responses as if he were fulfilling requirements that themselves procure the results. But one person’s responses even in the aggregate cannot relate to reconciliation in a causal way. How much more it is that none of his specific responses can do so. Even more, a specific formal response cannot produce a dynamic interpersonal consequence.⁹

Associating baptism with the big picture **(c)** gives wholeness and cohesiveness to the ordinance. Associating baptism with a subsequent specific fragments what should be seen as one whole. Connecting baptism with church membership, for example, separates church membership off as a distinct item and institutionalizes baptism. *“Baptized into Christ”* is not a metonymy for baptized into the church. The gift of the Spirit is not a separate item so as, perhaps, to supernaturalize a part that belongs to the one interpersonal baptism event. Sin as inherited guilt does not come into the picture separately so as to legalize baptism. Theologically the concern for wholeness leads us from separating the time of salvation from the time of church membership, from untying the time of being saved and receiving the Spirit, from contrasting visible and invisible or universal and local, from dividing between inner and outer response, from making necessary distinction between natural and supernatural, from speaking of water baptism vs. S/spirit baptism.¹⁰

We do not say, then, that baptism has a soteriological connection, a primarily soteriological connection, or a soteriological rather than ecclesiological connection. We do not say that baptism has an ecclesiological connection, a primarily ecclesiological connection, or an ecclesiological rather than soteriological connection. These approaches to the ordinance foster a rigid and fragmented feel for Christianity itself. They create artificial distinctions within the whole because they connect baptism with one thing that is coextensive and contemporaneous with the others.

(d) There is no perceived need to generate a non-biblical form to mark time-wise the initial identification with Christ. That is what has happened in the practice of kneeling and asking Jesus into your heart (“the sinner’s prayer”). That has happened, we believe, because a perceived vacuum was created by moving baptism from its up-front general place to one of the subsequent specifics and thereby depriving it of its intended function. Baptism as appeal to God (1 Peter 3:21) embodies the meaning associated with the sinner’s prayer.

2. Baptism is a commitment to values and purposes before it has any kind of association with benefits and consequences. We do not have Christ as savior without at the same time acknowledging him as Lord.

3. The antecedent baptism is separated from the consequent forgiveness, *etc.*, by (a) identity with Christ, (b) by God’s personal choice, and (c) by the giftedness of the consequences. We do not speak of baptism as a condition for reconciliation. Instead, we say identity with Christ is the condition for reconciliation, which involves forgiveness, fellowship, and membership. As a formal act that combines with the dynamic factors that it expresses, baptism communicates identification with Christ.

4. Baptism is an interpersonal response rather than a legal transaction.¹¹ It is easy to associate a formal act with a legal process, but commanding something formal does not necessarily mean instituting something legal. Formal acts can communicate and define personal relations as surely as they can effect results in legal operations. Christian ordinances, however, are performative, dramatic, expressive, and communicative, not authoritative and causal.

In summary, as part of standard response, baptism expresses personal identification with Christ and commitment to his values and purposes. In consequence of identity with Christ, God forgives sin, gives his Spirit, and adds to Christ’s body.

D. Foreign Practices and Concepts

Over the centuries, practices and concepts have arisen that we deem foreign to the interpersonal character and purpose of the new covenant, hence, foreign to the interpersonal nature and purpose of its ordinances. These shifts have gone in two directions: the ordinances have been reinterpreted as parts of (1) legal process and/or (2) natural operation. In so treating them, interpreters have introduced foreign elements. Beliefs and practices that stem from contextualizing the ordinances in legal and natural frameworks are foreign and contradictory to New Testament teaching. There is no basis for introducing such matters because the new covenant provides an interpersonal context for its ordinances, because its purpose is to establish interpersonal consequences, and because the originating factors in each person’s observance are personal. A problem must be solved in the realm of that problem. Since the problem exists in interpersonal matters (alienation), actions involved in its solution must be interpersonal (reconciliation). Interpersonal results do not come about by legal or natural means.¹²

1. Infant baptism

The interpersonal character of Christian ordinances, among other things, makes infant baptism unnatural. (a) Infant baptism cannot originate from the interpersonal factors prerequisite to an interpersonal ordinance. The meaning of a formal act is nullified by the absence of appropriate behavioral factors. Infants have no personal faith, and proxy faith, subsequent faith, or non-content faith cannot establish a personal relationship. Infants cannot

make commitment to Christ, and proxies cannot make commitment for them. The faith of another cannot stand for a person's own faith except in legal transaction, but Christian ordinances stand in a grace-faith covenant. A formal act in an interpersonal context has no meaning except as a performative act; it means something only if a person means something into it. Since infants cannot mean anything into the ordinance, baptizing infants has no meaning.

Besides the observation that infants cannot do what baptism is, they have no need for what it involves. **(b)** Infant baptism cannot be for the forgiveness of personal guilt because none exists yet. An infant cannot yet operate responsibly in regard to morality, and morality belongs only to interpersonal contexts.

(c) Infant baptism cannot be for the forgiveness of someone else's sin—original sin—because guilt is personal. In personal relations, guilt and penalty that come from personal action are no more transferable than the action itself. Baptism cannot have any value for forgiving "original guilt" because there is no way to transfer such guilt to him except by legal assignment; but legal assignment is foreign to interpersonal need, process, and consequences. Racial guilt is denied here in any sense that deals with divine fellowship and eternal destiny.

(d) Baptism is not an outward sign of an external covenant because the new covenant is not an external covenant, it does not have an external component, and its "sign" is not simply an external act. It is a covenant in which everyone under it must know the Lord to get into it.

2. Baptism for the dead (proxy baptism)

Persons establish interpersonal relationships. Proxy baptism is legal. By the nature of interpersonalism, one person's faith or obedience cannot substitute for another's. Legitimizing such a substitute requires moving outside the interpersonal realm of the problem in order to invoke a legal solution to it. Since baptism does not relate to legal operations, a proxy functionary cannot fulfill it. The seven sons of Sceva found out that Christianity does not accomplish its purposes by the magical invocation of the name of Christ or by going through certain rituals. Baptism for the dead breaches the principle of personal involvement in interpersonal operations as well as the lack of inherent necessity for formal acts in interpersonal operations.

3. Official administration

As to meaning, baptism is done by the "candidate," not by an administrator. Baptismal validity is not *ex opere operato*. What makes an observance valid depends on the kind of observance it is. Personal observance gets its validity from personal factors, but official administration belongs to legal transaction. Making the validity of baptism dependent on duly ordained clergy makes its validity like that of a wedding ceremony, which requires a duly authorized officer of the law as well as official witnesses. Baptism does not have to be performed "publicly" by a special person. Grace does not flow through the church by way of official operatives, but directly from God to the believer. Grace does not follow an institutional "flow chart"; it flows interpersonally.

Should God decide to establish authorized administration, he would do so for practical rather than theological reasons. His people would have to know that from positive commandment because they could not know it by inference from first principles. We know of no explicit or implicit teaching to that end in the New Testament. Anything of a practical sort that

the church comes up with must not pre-empt the interpersonal reality in which Christian ordinances stand.

Since the validity of baptism does not depend on who assists in its observance, we see no reason for refusing baptism performed by members of other Christian heritages or for considering it “alien baptism.” If it is baptism, there is no reason or right to redo it.

4. Required formula

The validity of baptism does not depend on any particular wording pronounced in connection with its observance. The candidate’s basic understanding of its meaning establishes its validity. The problem over “correct” formula centers on the “trinity” issue. Among Christian churches, churches of Christ, disciples of Christ there has been some latitude in views of the trinity and therefore on the manner in which that understanding might affect the form and formula for baptism. At any rate, the so-called “trinitarian” expression in Matthew 28 does not conflict with the “Jesus-only” statements in Acts. Since baptism is not a legal transaction, there is no notion here of the “valid wording of the contract.”

5. Delayed baptism

In some quarters of the ancient church, baptism came to be delayed as long as possible because Christians did not know what to do with post-baptismal sins. That practice—along with extreme unction—evidenced the tendency to view salvation as dealing with previous sins rather than with sin as such, that is, with sins rather than relationship. It was a quantifying approach to a relational issue.

In some quarters of the modern church, baptism is sometimes delayed until a new believer gets settled in a congregation to whom he can witness his faith through baptism and where he can serve and grow in the faith. This practice associates baptism with a particular consequence rather than with the initial commitment; it does so as something that identifies a person with the visible church (or a part of it) rather than with Christ. It treats the consequences as a series spread out over time rather than as aspects of one whole event. The logical series—forgiveness, gift of the Spirit, and membership in the body—gets correlated with chronological sequence so that what were intentionally simultaneous and coextensive are handled as if they were sequential and partials. Identification with Christ is the overwhelming emphasis in the New Testament, a stress that is more inclusive than church membership. In fact, only 1 Corinthians 12:13 speaks of “baptism” into the church, and there the apostle stresses the Spirit aspect of baptism since he says, “*In one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.*”¹³ If baptism is interpersonal with Christ, it relates to something that logically precedes entering a group or institution.

6. Periodic rebaptism

In ancient times, the practice of heremobaptism (“daily baptism”) considered baptism a ceremonial ablution that symbolized cleansing of sins committed since the last cleansing. In modern times, people request rebaptism periodically because they have sinned or sense a lull in their devotion to Christ. They turn to baptism as a way of relieving perhaps a hypersensitive conscience. As a result, baptism replaces ongoing repentance and prayer.

7. Baptism as initiation into finished business

On the opposite extreme of hemerobaptism stands any impulse to regard baptism as related to finished business. Interpersonal relationships cannot be finalized. Entering Christ is not like receiving a high school diploma, which gives permanent status and privileges even though the recipients may forget most of what they learned to get it. Interpersonal observances are not time-referenced. Law may validate for a time like a driver's license or permanently like a college degree. But personal relationships are processual, not categorical. When people establish relationship, they give no thought to how long. Friendships do not last so long or only so long. Initiation into friendship with God ushers in commitment to a holy life of growth; it does not mean obtaining certain desirable consequences and having them "for good."

8. Baptismal regeneration

Baptism does not regenerate inherited natural depravity. We know of no biblical evidence for such a meaning of the ordinance, and we see no positive basis for the doctrine of natural depravity itself—at least in any sense or degree that precludes personal response to the gospel.¹⁴ There is nothing involved here like an "infused grace." Such an idea moves salvation into ontology and attempts to invoke miracle to solve alienation. It does so despite the lack of any teaching that Adam's spiritual capacity after he sinned differed from what it was before in a biologically inheritable sense. Baptism does not enable people to have faith by miracle; it expresses the mustard-seed faith they already have through personal influence. We do, of course, acknowledge the psychological depravity that arises from factors personally produced rather than genetically transmitted.

9. Inherent necessity

(a) Considering baptism inherently necessary would misunderstand the nature and purpose of a formal act. Interpersonal processes do not require any formal act. So establishing identification with God requires no ordinance at all. If one is instituted, it is for the person's benefit, not God's or the system's operation. An ordinance serves to focalize meaning, concretize significance, clarify the invisible, make the abstract tangible. Christians perform ordinances because they are appropriate, not because they are legally, rationally, or naturally necessary. We are not to take a *sine qua non* attitude toward ordinances. Ordinances are "necessary" because that God has instituted them, not because he had to institute them.

(b) Considering baptism inherently necessary would also misunderstand the nature and purpose of God himself. God is a person and therefore operates like one; he does not operate with the rigidity characteristic of law, nature, or thought. He takes into consideration intent of action, attitude of persons, and purpose of operation.

These two observations about necessity enable Christians to generalize salvation principles to practical situations not specifically dealt with in the New Testament. Circumstances sometimes do not make baptism possible—or do not make it possible without risk to life or health. A repentant believer committed to Jesus Christ might die without baptism through some misunderstanding or insuperable circumstance. It may not be clear whether a young person with a terminal condition has yet attained the age of accountability. Persons committed to Christ may honestly misunderstand that baptism should have been their own response or should have been an act of immersion. For purposes of fellowship and Christian unity, we must deal with situations like these. We should not interpret them like cases where someone has not filled out properly all the right documents for a passport. We must deal with them by inferences from the nature of the new covenant and the redemptive purpose of the holy,

loving God who instituted ordinances and knows the hearts of “those who diligently seek him.” All the while, each believer strives both to teach and learn the Lord’s will more perfectly on this and other issues.

In matters of personal relationship, formal matters can be overlooked entirely for legitimate practical reasons. The situation with baptism is analogous to Paul’s treatment of circumcision in Romans 2:25-29. Both circumcision and baptism are formal acts related to spiritual relationships. Circumcision had two aspects to it, one national and the other spiritual. Baptism does not have a national aspect to it, but it does parallel circumcision in its spiritual associations—as in identifying an adult proselyte with Israel and therefore with the values and purposes expressed in God’s constitution for that nation. Speaking of circumcision in its spiritual dimension, Paul observes, *“If then the uncircumcision keeps the ordinances of the law, will not his uncircumcision be counted for circumcision?”* (Romans 2:26). Paul may have in mind godfearers, or *sebomenoi*, like Cornelius (Acts 10:2, 22, 35; 13:16, 26; note 15:7-9). These people worshipped the one true God but had not been circumcised to become proselytes and full-fledged Jews. In light of 2:6-16, Paul may also have in mind more distant people who had only conscience to guide them.

In speaking about the spiritual aspect of circumcision, Paul says that not conforming to the values and purposes in God’s revelation changes a Jew’s circumcision to uncircumcision. Conversely, conforming to them changes a Gentile’s uncircumcision into circumcision. Paul does not explain why this is so, but we infer that it is so by the nature of the case: personal relationships do not depend on formal observances. Matters of the heart—sincerity, motivation, attitude—override the lack of formal observance under appropriate conditions.

Paul is quite bold here. He does not treat this circumstance in a neutral way by saying that God will deal with uncircumcised persons in a just manner. That would leave the matter open-ended, and readers could still infer that uncircumcised people were lost because of their uncircumcision. Instead, Paul treats the “pious uncircumcised” in a positive way, affirming that because they keep God’s ordinances, God reckons their uncircumcision as circumcision. His comment is reminiscent of a later one about Abraham, who in his uncircumcision had faith/trust reckoned for righteousness (Romans 4:3, 9-12). The righteousness Abraham had come from interpersonal considerations (faith/trust, promise) rather than legal ones. So the consequent blessings of the patriarch and his role among men grew from interpersonal considerations: *“Not through law was the promise to Abraham or his seed”* (4:13). Legal and interpersonal are different kinds of systems (Romans 4:14-16; Galatians 3:10-12). Formal considerations like circumcision the apostle affirms can even be waived under appropriate circumstances in spiritual matters, or as we are saying, in interpersonal systems. If an action can even be set aside under legitimate circumstances, it has a different meaning and type of necessity than an act done in a legal system.

Of course, it is “necessary” to do what God tells us, and so baptism can be said to be necessary in that “interpersonal” sense. That is simply part of acknowledging the lordship of Christ in conversion. But most cases we have to deal with come up because of honest misobedience rather than intentional disobedience.

10. Baptism as an outer act

No correlation should be drawn between baptism and outward action. For one thing, valid outward response arises from internal factors they express. Furthermore, no clear line

exists between overt behavior and inner commitment. Finally, visible obedience reciprocates with invisible motivation. Separating inner and outer seems as artificial in the theology of baptism as it does anywhere else in Christianity.¹⁵

There are no short cuts to personal relationships and no artificial substitutes for what it takes to have the real thing. Even as a relational process involves actions on both sides of the relationship, so also it involves both inner and outer actions on both sides of it. No correlation should be drawn, then, between baptism as outer action and visible church membership. Baptism as outer action not only makes an unnatural distinction between inner and outer, it makes an unnatural distinction between salvation and the church—between the invisible church of the saved and the visible church as a religious community. Baptism, outer action, and visible church membership do not constitute a set. Instead, baptism personally identifies people with Christ up front at the level of the whole, not with any particular consequent within it. Those particulars come from God only in consequence of identification with the whole, that is, with Christ.

Not dividing between inner and outer response can correspond also with not dividing between water baptism and S/spirit baptism, depending on how the latter expression is understood. If “baptism in the Spirit” is taken as alternative terminology for “gift of the Spirit,” it refers to what we have called the second consequence of identification with Jesus Christ. S/spirit baptism would then be simultaneous with commitment to Christ in so-called “water baptism.” The aspects of a whole may be distinguishable mentally, but they are not separate in the reality itself. In another direction, since outer does not correlate with works, legal operation, and baptism, inner does not correlate with faith, ontic operation (miraculous regeneration by the Spirit), and Spirit baptism. Scripture never uses the expression “water baptism.”¹⁶ In fact, one way of reading 1 Corinthians 12:13 joins (water) baptism and the Spirit into one statement: “*In one Spirit we were all [water?] baptized into one body.*” We prefer, then, to consider inner and outer responses and their consequences as facets of the same whole event.

Baptism does not deal with legal and natural processes, so it is not legitimized by principles derived from those categories. Authority and miracle do not remove alienation. Alienation and reconciliation have to do with persons and therefore with behavior that makes or breaks fellowship between persons. Alienation and reconciliation do not deal with legal and ontological means or ends, but with interpersonal ones. Interpersonal consequences come from interpersonal antecedents.

D. Matters of Indifference

Christians in the “restoration movement” have not practiced trine immersion, although they would probably not question its validity. They have not concerned themselves with public vs. private baptism or ancient issues like cold vs. warm water or running vs. still water. There have been a variety of opinions on various “re-baptism” situations and on the question about the age of accountability.

¹For a more complete treatment interpersonalism as understood here, see the author’s *Interpersonalism: The integrating Reality for Christian Truth*. The presentation is a preliminary survey of the reasons for considering this concept the basic point of Christianity and a brief compilation of the ways such an understanding affects various aspects of Christian revelation.

²In Romans 11:26-27 Paul loosely cites the Septuagint form of Isaiah 59:20 as influenced by the wording of Psalm 14:7 (LXX 13:7). The subject again is a new covenant whose object is to take away sins.

³This generalized understanding of the significance of baptism means that we may not need to distinguish between the normal sequential preposition εἰς used after βαπτίζω and the one-time usages of ἐν (Acts 10:48) and ἐπὶ (Acts 2:38), even though the three expressions may not be exactly synonymous. They may be variant specific prepositions in Greek translation for the more general Hebrew inseparable preposition לְ in the expression “*baptism to the name* [לְשֵׁם].”

⁴The word translated “*united with*” or “*planted together*” (σύμφυτος) contains the word picture “*grown together*” (σύν + φύω). “Identification” appears to be a fair representation of Paul’s idea here.

⁵From passages like Romans 1:23; Revelation 9:7; and Septuagint usages in Deuteronomy 4:12, 16; Exodus 20:4, etc., we infer that the word ὁμοίωμα involves a likeness in form rather than just a similarity in meaning, which is carried more in the word ἀντίτυπος (cp. “antitype”).

⁶For the intended distinction here between cause and condition, see Virgil Warren’s *What the Bible Says About Salvation* (Joplin, Missouri: College Press, 1982), pp. 194-216. In general, a condition involves a dependent first person who can do nothing decisive about his need, a sovereign second person who is under no compulsion to meet that need, a free promise to help, an obedience commanded to the person in need, and a result bestowed by the other person. A condition precedes the result but does not cause it directly or indirectly, in whole or in part. Under conditionality, antecedent acts are performed, but consequent results are given. Conditionality is an interpersonal construct; it involves one person’s active trust in another person’s free promise to give. Under works, there is no second person, no promise, and no bestowed results. In that case the result is the righteousness prerequisite to being viewed as righteous so there can be fellowship with the Righteous One. The result would come directly and only from a person’s own continuous obedience to all elements of the standard for righteousness (Galatians 3:10-12).

⁷Mark 16:16 presents a technical exception if accorded textual integrity. Even there, of course, identification with Christ comes into the picture. Belief and baptism are responses to the gospel, which is the good news of salvation through Christ.

⁸Even if baptism were connected with a consequent specific like forgiveness, it would not be a “work” in the Pauline sense. It would be a condition whereas works are causes. As suggested by Habakkuk 2:4 and Genesis 15:6, “faith” is Paul’s code word for the interpersonal situation; “works” is his code word for the legal situation (Romans 3:28). Inner and outer actions occur in both situations, but “works” are actions done in the context of law; hence, they have causal significance under law because continuously doing everything commanded in the Law produces the person’s own perfect righteousness. In faith, however, we only “have faith” that our active concern for righteousness will be viewed graciously by the other Person and reckoned for what it seeks to be rather than is.

⁹There is nothing in baptism that implies automatic results. A person may say that there is more to baptism than identification with Christ, and in a sense that is so; but anything “more” is within this definition, not besides it.

¹⁰Some of these matters are worked out in more detail below under “Foreign Practices and Concepts.”

¹¹Modern views of baptism have been historically conditioned. In the degenerate medieval church, salvation had come to be viewed and practiced in legal, institutional terms and baptism along with it.

By way of reaction, salvation—at least in some ways—began to be moved out of legal procedure; but since baptism had meantime been construed as a legal act, the reformers retained that feel for it. So, it was associated with the only thing in Christianity that could have the appearance of legality—church membership.

Church membership, however, is a subsequent specific; and so others have reacted again by associating baptism with a more important specific: forgiveness of sins.

This whole scenario has erred in two ways: (1) by making baptism a legal act and (2) by associating baptism with a specific consequence. The method of solution erred by being reactive rather than positive: it reacted to the contemporary situation (reformation) rather than making a positive start from New Testament teaching about first principles (restoration).

¹²For a more organized contrast between legal and interpersonal, see the accompanying essays “Law and Interpersonalism in Contrast” and “Types of Systems.”

¹³“*Baptism in one Spirit into one body*” would then refer to the logical movement from the second to third consequence of identity with Christ. The expression “*baptism in the Spirit*” would equal “*gift of the Spirit*” in Acts 2:38. See under II, C, 10 for another way of understanding the 2 Corinthians 12:13 statement.

¹⁴The historical group of fellowships that designate themselves the “restoration movement” are rather unique among evangelicals in not having a doctrine of natural depravity. They have not seen in the historic fall any biblical indication that man incurred a loss of ability in spiritual matters over what Adam had before he sinned. In its place there has been put what can be called psychological depravity, which comes from one’s own ingrained experience rather than through genetic heredity. What has come about by experience can be overcome by personal influence in contrast to supernatural miracle. The universal sinfulness of people and their inability to save themselves has been explained on other grounds than as results of depravity in ontic capacity. See *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 18-43 for one discussion of universal sinfulness and the impossibility of self-salvation.

¹⁵In Paul, works and faith do not correspond with inner and outer so as to make baptism a work. Works differs from faith by the settings in which they occur (law and interpersonalism respectively) and by the kind of connections they have with consequences (cause and conditionality respectively). The point is not what act people do, but why they do it; the issue is what meaning and purpose the act has, and how it relates to consequences. Such things are determined by the kind of system in which the actions stand.

¹⁶“Water baptism” does describe John’s baptism (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26, 31, 33; Acts 1:5; 11:16), but Christian baptism is not simply John’s baptism overlaid with the gift of the Spirit. The twelve disciples of John in Acts 19:1-7 were baptized in the name of Jesus, which shows that the meaning of the two baptisms were parallel, not hierarchical. They had parallel meanings because they identified with separate matters. At most, John’s baptism was a repentance baptism with consequent forgiveness of sins. Christ’s baptism, however, involves consequent forgiveness and relationship with the Spirit through identity with Christ.