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WHAT DOES BAPTISM DO FOR ANYONE? PART I: EXEGETICAL BACKGROUND

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The subject of baptism has led to many disagreements among Christians: whom should we baptize—only professing believers, or their infants as well? What happens to the person baptized? Is baptism even important? There are other questions—for example, not everyone agrees on how much water we should use, and some churches do not even practice baptism at all—but we'll content ourselves with those listed here.

In this essay, I intend to show that the concepts I have discussed elsewhere, such as the world shared between an author and his audience, worldview, membership in the people of God, and the nature of biblical language, will help us to think clearly on topics such as baptism that continue to cause controversy among Christians.

The Christian tradition, from its earliest stages, has held to some kind of "baptismal realism," that is, the view that by means of baptism God actually effects some change in the condition of the person baptized. We find in the tradition a variety of answers about what aspect of the person's "condition" is changed, and what such changes amount to.

The present tendency in my community—American Presbyterianism with a conservative evangelical flavor—is to regard any kind of baptismal realism with dread, as "the road back to Rome." For example, here is what Benjamin Warfield wrote in his influential book *The Plan of Salvation* (1918):[1]

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[1] Benjamin Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation* (1918; repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 18–19.

> The exact point of difference between [the "sacerdotalists" (such as the Roman Catholics) and the evangelicals] turns on the question whether God, by whose power alone salvation is wrought, saves men by dealing himself immediately with them as individuals, or only by establishing supernatural endowed instrumentalities in the world by means of which men may be saved. . . . [E]vangelicalism, seeking to conserve what it conceives to be only consistent supernaturalism, sweeps away every intermediary between the soul and its God, and leaves the soul dependent for its salvation on God alone, operating upon it by his immediate grace.

I have the highest regard for Warfield and consider many of his studies to be of great value; but the bald manner in which Warfield stated his opposition between "sacerdotalism" and "evangelicalism" will simply not survive scrutiny. It is entirely possible that God can employ means in saving persons and administering his people, and even do so characteristically, without him thereby sacrificing his sovereignty. Further, to suppose that "supernatural" implies "without means" raises all manner of questions about the way that God works in the world (called "metaphysics"). Suffice it for now to say that in classical Christian metaphysics, God is acting every bit as "directly" in the "natural" events as he is in the "supernatural" ones. Events are "supernatural" when their outcomes exceed the natural (or created) causal powers of the things involved.[2] Thus, even though Warfield had the wholly praiseworthy goal of protecting God's sovereign freedom, here he has not really helped us to do so.

It is probably also worth observing that on this subject Warfield does not speak for the entire Reformed tradition, nor even for the Presbyterian segment of which he was a part: the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question 88, discusses "the outward and ordinary *means whereby* Christ communicates to us the benefits of redemption," which include the ministry of the Word and the sacraments.

Some people argue in reply to views like Warfield's that baptismal *anti*-realism—the view that "nothing *really* happens" in the visible symbol, the main benefit is what it makes us think about—is the road to denying the goodness of the material realm, and of our embodied existence; that is, the road to denying the goodness of something that God has declared "very good." Again, to steer a clear path through these

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[2] See my discussion of a biblically-based supernaturalism in *The God of Miracles: An Exegetical Examination of God's Action in the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 127–34, with remarks on Exod. 14:21 at 131, and on special divine action in human moral transformation, 101–06. For a briefer discussion, see my *Science and Faith: Friends or Foes?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 167–70.

options we must come back to the principle of *sola Scriptura*: our goal must be to follow the Scripture wherever it leads.

In this essay I want to establish that baptismal realism *of some sort* is grounded in the Bible and in its worldview; I will then go on to discuss *what sort of* realism the Bible implies. My argument will take the following shape: First, I will show that "sacramental realism" is a basic part of the Old Testament ceremonial (or Levitical) system, and describe the realism under that system, relating it to the Old Testament worldview. Second, I will argue that the New Testament refers to baptism using terms and ideas from the Levitical ceremonies, and assumes the same creational worldview that underlies the Old Testament. Third, we will then be in a position to look at particular "realistic" biblical statements to ascertain *the kind of* realism they support.

I. Old Testament Ceremonial Realism

A. The Meaning of "Clean" and "Unclean"

Any Bible reader is familiar with the way Leviticus makes a distinction between what is "clean" and "unclean," although the actual function of this system mystifies most—and is still a matter of debate among the scholars. I do not intend here to enter into all the disagreements among the specialists, as I really have little to offer on that score. Instead, I will simply provide enough of a sense of how the system worked so that the reader can appreciate how the ceremonies apply in our discussion of baptism here.[3]

The classifications "clean" and "unclean" apply to a wide range of things and situations: certain kinds of animals are "unclean," which means the people of Israel were not allowed either to eat their flesh or to bring that flesh as a sacrifice. People could become unclean in a number

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[3] The following sources are helpful in this discussion: David P. Wright, "Unclean and Clean (Old Testament)," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman et al. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:729a–741b; John E. Hartley, "Holy and Holiness," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 420a–431b; K. E. Brower, "Holiness," in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. D. R. W. Woods et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 477b–478b; Gordon Wenham, "Clean and Unclean," in *New Bible Dictionary*, 209b–212a; Peter Jenson, "Holiness in the Priestly Writings of the Old Testament," in *Holiness: Past and Present*, ed. Stephen C. Barton (London: T & T Clark, 2003), 93–121; and Jay A. Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), especially chapter 5. Sklar in particular, both in his writing and in personal conversation, has aided my understanding of these matters.

of different circumstances: by natural events, such as bearing a child or making love; by events that one could hardly avoid, such as touching the corpse of a dead kinsman; by accidents, such as contracting skin diseases; by committing a sin.

It would therefore be wrong to say that "unclean" is the same as "sinful," although sin does make a person unclean. Certainly to say that an animal is unclean is not to declare it evil: for example, the raven is an unclean bird, but not for that reason outside of God's loving concern (Ps. 147:9).

The categories "clean" and "unclean" correspond to the ideas of "permitted" and "not permitted"; indeed, to try to enter God's presence in an unclean state puts a person in grave danger. As one scholar has put it, "Uncleanness or impurity is basically defined as that which is a threat to or opposes holiness, and hence must be kept separate from that sphere."[4] We can support this with Leviticus 15:31:

> Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst.[5]

Along these lines, another scholar writes:

> The purpose of these rules [for clean and unclean] was to establish boundaries in the routine of daily life in order that the Israelites might live as a holy people serving Yahweh, who is holy. The primary boundary was to prevent any impure person or thing from entering sacred space; therefore, all had to be ritually clean before entering the sanctuary lest holiness consume them. . . . The category clean/unclean, on the other hand, primarily defined the ritual standing of people, food and space. . . . The major danger in becoming unclean lay in coming into contact with the holy, for holiness is powerful, consuming all that is unclean. There was a latent moral danger: any person who failed to take the steps leading to ritual purity committed a deliberate sin against God and became subject to the penalties for such a wrong.[6]

We should qualify this just a little, by noting that the purpose of the rules was to serve as a continual reminder for Israel "to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean" (Lev. 10:10; this was originally spoken to priests, but they are in turn to teach the people, according to verse 11). This pattern, which was for distinguishing between various types of *ritual* purity and impurity, was

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[4] Wright, "Unclean and Clean," 729a.

[5] Quotations from the Bible and Apocrypha are based on *The English Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[6] Hartley, *"Holy and Holiness,"* 426.

to set a more general pattern for life: distinguishing between *moral* purity and impurity.[7]

B. "Clean" and "Unclean" as Ritual or Administrative Status

Some scholars of the Levitical system use the term "ritual status" to explain how the clean and unclean distinction worked in Israel. That is, a clean person is eligible to participate in the religious rituals of the people of God, while an unclean person is not.[8] Another way of describing this is to call it "administrative status" to emphasize the way in which those who administer the people of God are to relate to the person. It is crucial to appreciate that with these terms people are described by their status, and not necessarily by the moral condition of their hearts. Further, a person's ritual status has a bearing not only on his relationship with God, but also on his place within the community of God's people.

Either of these terms, however, can lead a modern Evangelical to misunderstand; we tend to dismiss "ritual" or "administrative" as "*merely* ritual or administrative," meaning that they are external only, and have no real bearing on the heart. From the biblical perspective there is nothing "merely" external about it: the status of being "clean" admits a person into a web of relationships, privileges, and influences among the covenant people, whose aim is to foster what we might call a "moral status" of cleanness.

Similarly, the Old Testament can use the word "holy" (with its related words "sanctify" or "consecrate") to denote status as well: the people of God are ritually or administratively "holy," which means that they are consecrated to the LORD who is himself holy in every way—and thus they have both the opportunity and the responsibility to live in a holy manner (the moral status). Leviticus 20:7–8 brings it all together:

> Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy [aim for a holy life, a moral condition of holiness], for I am the LORD your God. Keep my

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[7] I have suggested, in *Science and Faith*, 99, that the rules on clean and unclean serve three functions: 1) they make a distinction between Israel and the Gentiles (see Lev. 20:24–26); 2) they provide a useful metaphor for *moral* impurity (as in Ezek. 36:25–27, which we will take up below); and 3) they give Israel a chance to apply their doctrine of creation, in allowing the Creator full rights to instruct his people how they may or may not use the creation. Although I have listed these as three items, they are of course closely related. See also Meir Soloveichik, "Locusts, Giraffes, and the Meaning of Kashrut," *Azure* 23 (Winter 5766 [2006]): 62–96, on point 1 above.

[8] We might note that there are circumstances in which one could come into the tabernacle in an unclean state as long as one was coming to address that state (as in Leviticus 12, where a woman comes to be purified after childbirth).

> statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sanctifies you [who makes you administratively holy].

A person who is administratively clean or holy may or may not have availed himself of the covenant privileges with all his heart, though he certainly should. Thus when we are speaking of administrative or ritual status we should recognize that the priestly language is careful, perhaps even "technical" in its own way; but at the same time it functions much as phenomenological language does, speaking in terms of how one appears to the human eye, and not commenting on the inner condition of the heart (which is not visible to us anyhow).

C. Ceremonies of Cleansing

It is fair to say, in view of this, that "the entire cultus [Levitical ceremonial system] has to do with making it safe for God's people to encounter the holy God who dwells in their midst."[9] This certainly includes addressing their ritual status, but it also includes cultivating moral aspiration and providing moral instruction as well.

The typical way to change from unclean to clean was to use some set of ceremonies under the supervision of the Levites. These ceremonies often involved water rituals and sacrifices, and we will focus on water ceremonies in keeping with our topic. For example, in Numbers 19:11–13, a person who has touched a dead body is to be unclean for seven days. He is to "cleanse himself" (literally, "de-sin himself") on the third and seventh days with water in order to become clean, and if he omits these water ceremonies, he may not become clean, "his uncleanness is still on him" (v. 13). Similarly, the priestly descendant of Aaron who becomes unclean "shall be unclean until the evening and shall not eat of the holy things unless he has bathed his body in water" (Lev. 22:6).

Compare how the people of Israel are to prepare to meet with God at Sinai in Exodus 19. Moses is to "consecrate" the people and to have them "wash their garments" (v. 10); in addition, Moses commands the men, "Do not go near a woman" (v. 15). Washing their garments makes them administratively clean, and abstaining from union with their wives keeps them clean (compare Lev. 15:18; 1 Sam. 21:4–5).

D. Ceremonial Realism and the Old Testament Worldview

It is clear from the above discussion that the Old Testament would have us believe that a physical ceremony, carried out under divine directives, *actually changes a person's status*. In other words, we are failing to read the Bible adequately if we take these ceremonies as only *symbolizing* the

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[9] Brower, *"Holiness,"* 477b.

change in status, if by "symbolize" we mean "make a picture that can help us think the right things." As one scholar of Old Testament ritual put it,

> Ritual or ritualized activity does not merely communicate as a kind of sign language. Rather, it is believed to *do* something that changes reality in a way that goes beyond the constraints of cause and effect that operate in activities belonging to the mundane physical world that are susceptible to manipulation by the performers.[10]

The idea that "physical" ceremonies can mediate "spiritual" benefits is rooted in the Old Testament worldview, particularly in its notion that the God of Israel is in fact the God who made all things from nothing and declared his creation "very good." As I pointed out in my commentary on Genesis 1–4,

> God made a good world as the arena for man to live out his relationship with his Maker. Though mankind has fallen, the goodness of the creation remains, and it remains the arena for man's life—but now it is the arena for redemption. The ordinary activities of life, such as eating, working, procreating, and breathing, are good. Any pain that man finds in these stems not from badness of the activities but from the sinfulness of man. Physical ordinances are a fitting means for God to work out his purposes for his people: he ordains sacrifices, beautiful garments for his priests, and an elaborate shrine for corporate worship, with "smells and bells" in the liturgy. The people use their bodies, bowing, kneeling, prostrating themselves, raising hands, and so forth, in their acts of worship. . . .
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> The body is the vehicle by which we worship as well: in the Bible people pray and sing aloud, stand, kneel, raise their hands, prostrate themselves, use musical instruments, burn incense, perceive beauty, receive sacraments. Some Protestants have over-reacted to abuses by stressing the action of the heart, as if it could replace the actions of the body (rather than work with them). The right reply is *abusus usum non tollit*, "abuse does not take away proper use."[11]

We can always count on C. S. Lewis to put it more colorfully, anticipating some of our discussion yet to come:

> There is no good trying to be more spiritual than God. God never meant man to be a purely spiritual creature. That is why he uses material things like bread and wine to put the new life into us. We may think

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[10] Roy Gane, *Cult and Character: Purification Offerings, Day of Atonement, and Theodicy* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), 15.

[11] C. John Collins, *Genesis 1–4: A Linguistic, Literary, and Theological Commentary* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2006), 244, 274.

> this rather crude and unspiritual. God does not: He invented eating. He likes matter. He invented it.[12]

Some Christians have thought of bodily ordinances such as sacraments as a concession to human weakness,[13] but this is a failure to grasp properly the creational worldview of the Bible; rather, these ordinances endorse the goodness of human bodily existence and the goodness of the material creation.

At the same time, the biblical worldview does not make the effect of these ceremonies into a kind of magic. When these ceremonies work, it is not because the results come from the natural properties of the material elements, nor is it because God has so tied himself to the ceremonies that he must convey benefit without regard to the subjective condition of the worshipers; rather, it is because God in his good pleasure has added something. The biblical authors give no in-depth explanation for how the ceremonies work—they simply take for granted that they do work. C. S. Lewis once offered a definition of magic that he applied to the sacraments: "I should define 'magic' in this sense as 'objective efficacy which cannot be further analysed.'" Well, if that is all we mean by magic, then we may apply the term to the sacraments—though usually in theological discussions a more pejorative sense of "magic" (as some power inherent in the material substances, or that works "automatically") lies behind the objections.[14]

Further along these lines, we indicated above that the ceremonies must be "carried out under divine directives." Certainly the Old Testament assumes that a properly installed priest will officiate; it also assumes that the requirements of the Pentateuch, both doctrinal and practical, will be followed. But there is also a requirement on what we may call the subjective side, that is, on the part of the person receiving the benefits to his status: such a person is to embrace those benefits in

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[12] C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Scribner, 1952), 65 (book 2, chapter 5).

[13] For example, see Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (German first edition, 1861; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 609 (ch. 24, §28): "Hence a man who is so strong in faith, that he can be joyfully confident of his state of grace can do without the sacraments." (This is Heppe's own comment, not necessarily that of the Reformed tradition.) Heppe has virtually reduced the sacraments' benefit to the good things they make us think. Try using this reasoning to ration the hugs you give your children!

[14] C. S. Lewis, *Prayer: Letters to Malcolm* (London: Collins, 1966), 105. He calls the sacrament of communion "big medicine and strong magic." One must always pay attention to what another person means by his terms!

true faith and humble penitence, aiming to make proper use of these benefits for his growth in moral purity.

Allow me an illustration from popular (American) culture. The film *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) is about George Bailey, whose patience in doing good leads him to what look like unendurable troubles. Clarence is his guardian angel (an angel second class, hoping to earn his wings), who grants George his wish never to have been born. When George and Clarence go to a bar called "Nick's" (owned by the unexpectedly nasty Nick), Nick rings the cash register and Clarence cites the dictum, "Every time you hear a bell ring, it means that some angel's just got his wings." (He gives no causal explanation of how this can happen, or of what happens when it is abused.) Nick is a cynical and brutal man because George Bailey (who now had never been born) had not had a good influence on him; he has George and Clarence thrown out of the bar, and then goes to the cash register and keeps ringing it. "Get me!" he says. "I'm givin' out wings!" We, the viewing audience, see Nick's antics for what they are: an atrocious abuse of the "divine directive" that Clarence cited, which God is under no obligation to honor.

In traditional theological terms, these qualifications mean that the Old Testament worldview does in fact entail some kind of distinction between the sign and the thing signified, that is, between the ceremony and the benefits received at the deepest level of a person's being. There is nothing "willy-nilly" or "automatic" in the ceremonies' effect, if by that we mean without regard to the way a person lays hold of the status benefits.

Most of the Old Testament material on this topic addresses the sacrificial system more than it does the washings, but since the principles are the same, we can use the sacrificial references to start. Consider, for example, Proverbs 15:8, which is typical:

> The sacrifice of the wicked [here, the one who is a covenant member but rejects the covenant in his heart] is an abomination to the LORD;
> but the prayer of the upright [here, one who has really laid hold of the covenant] is acceptable to him.[15]

God is fully able to tell the difference between those who have made proper use of their status and those who have not, although in many cases we cannot tell.

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[15] Prov. 21:27 is similar; compare also Prov. 14:9; 1 Sam. 15:22; Isa. 1:11–17; 29:13; Jer. 7:21–23; Mic. 6:6–8; (to list no others), which neither denounce nor "relativize" the sacrificial system as such (which is how many evangelicals read it), but clarify that the sacrifices were given to be used by those who embrace the covenant from the heart. See my discussion in "Proverbs and the Levitical System," *Presbyterion* 35, no. 1 (2009): 9–34.

But though we should distinguish between the sign and the signified, it does not follow that we are free to separate them. Consider Psalm 51:2, 7, where the penitent person asks:

> Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
> and cleanse me from my sin! . . .
>
> Purge [literally *de-sin*, as in Num. 19:11] me with hyssop,
> and I shall be clean;
> wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.[16]

This is the prayer of one who intends to employ his administrative status for moral growth; he goes on to pray for a *clean* heart (v. 10).

E. Terminology

The main Hebrew words for describing the washing ceremonies are:

- *rakhats* (רחץ), "to wash," usually of persons or body parts, and generally rendered in Greek with λούω;
- *kibbes* (כבס), also "to wash," or more often, "to launder," commonly rendered into Greek with πλύνω; and
- *tabal* (טבל), "to dip," rendered into Greek with βάπτω, and once with βαπτίζω (our word "baptize").[17]

The words for "clean" are usually *tahar* (טהר) and cognates, which then come into Greek with forms related to καθαρός

For example, the person being cleansed from leprosy must "*wash* [*kibbes*, πλύνω] his clothes . . . and *bathe himself* [*rakhats*, λούω] in water, and he shall be *clean* [*tahar*, καθαρός]" (Lev. 14:8).

The Pentateuch does not apply the term *tabal*, "to dip," to people being washed; normally it uses that word to refer to dipping an implement into a fluid in order to sprinkle that fluid (as hyssop, Exod. 12:22, or a finger, Lev. 4:6), and its normal Greek rendering is βάπτω. Indeed, there is only one place in the Old Testament that uses this Hebrew term to describe applying water to a person, and it provides important background to any discussion of baptism: 2 Kings 5:14. This, as it turns out, is the one place where the Greek βαπτίζω renders this Hebrew word.

In 2 Kings 5:1–14, the Syrian (and thus Gentile) general Naaman has leprosy, and his Israelite servant girl urges him to go to the Israelite prophet, Elisha, who will "cure" (v. 3; Hebrew *'asap* [אסף], Greek συνάγω, both literally "gather") him from his leprosy. When the general comes to

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[16] Similarly, Isa. 1:16–17.

[17] Greek βάπτω generally means "to dip," and βαπτίζω is derived from it.

Elisha, the prophet changes the topic a little, from "cure" to "cleanse" (v. 10):

> Go and *wash* [Hebrew *rakhats* (רחץ), Greek λούω] in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall *be restored* [Hebrew *shub* (שוב), Greek ἐςπιστρέφω, both "return"], and you shall *be clean* [Hebrew *tahar* (טהר), Greek καθαρίζω, passive, "become clean"].[18]

Naaman is offended because he expected Elisha to stand before him and perform some great miracle; and he thinks that if it comes to washing, why not use the better rivers of Damascus? But Naaman's servants overcome his objection and convince him to obey the prophet. In verse 14 we read,

> So he went down and *dipped himself* [Hebrew *tabal* (טבל), Greek βαπτίζω, middle] seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God, and his flesh *was restored* like the flesh of a little child, and he *was clean*.

In Leviticus 14, when a leper is healed, he is then made clean by a ceremony that includes washing. Here in 2 Kings 5, the ceremony conveys both the healing and the cleansing. The result is that this Gentile becomes a dedicated worshiper of the LORD (v. 17), albeit with a special dispensation (vv. 18–19).[19]

Let us examine two more Jewish texts from the inter-testamental period, both of which use βαπτίζω for ceremonial washings. First, there is Judith 12:7, where the heroine Judith "bathed herself" (βαπτίζω, middle) at a spring in order to make herself clean (v. 9, "she returned clean") from the uncleanness she would have contracted in the camp of the Gentile commander Holofernes.

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[18] Cf. Luke 17:14–15 for a similar connection of "cleanse" to "heal."

[19] It is attractive to suppose that this particular example is especially appropriate: in Luke 4:27 Jesus cites this as an example of God's interest in the Gentiles, and the spreading of the people of God to include the Gentiles is a major theme in Acts. Hence it is fitting that such a ceremony should be the mark of entry into the people of God. It does not seem, however, that New Testament authors make much of this, nor have I found patristic authors who pursue it. It is worth noting that the traditional Jewish commentary of Yehudah Kiel, *Sefer Melakim* 2 (Da'at Miqra; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), תקח, connects this text to the Rabbinic maxim, "the proselyte who converts is like a newborn child" (Yebamoth 22a and elsewhere). If this maxim had any connection to Christian views of the new birth, then it is no surprise that baptism and new birth would be connected, though we must be careful to discern just what these writers would mean by "new birth" (see "Baptism and 'Regeneration'" in part 2 of this article).

Our second example from the inter-testamental period comes from the book of Ben Sira (also called Ecclesiasticus), where we find the observation in 34:25 (Greek and RSV; ESV/NRSV has it as v. 30, and the Hebrew is not extant):

βαπτιζόμενος ἀπὸ νεκροῦ καὶ πάλιν ἁπτόμενος αὐτοῦ	If someone *bathes* [ESV/NRSV *washes*] after touching a dead body and touches it again,
τί ὠφέλησεν ἐν τῷ *λουτρῷ* αὐτοῦ	what has he gained by his *washing*?

The passage refers to the regulations of Numbers 19:11–13 about being cleansed from touching a dead body (as we noted above). Interestingly enough, Ben Sira is at pains to remind us that one must not presume on the ritual apart from subjective compliance; that is, he is aware of the sign/signified distinction, and does not want anyone to presume.[20]

Rabbinic Hebrew, in contrast to biblical, uses the verb *tabal* and its cognate noun *tebilah* ("dipping, bath") for the ceremonial washings.[21] For example, the person who has bathed in the daytime and must wait until sundown to be clean is called *tebul yom* ("one who has bathed in daytime"), and there is a tractate in the Mishnah by that name, dealing with the requirements for such a person. The idea is found in, for example, Leviticus 15:5 (regarding cleansing after bodily discharges), though the Rabbinic terminology is not.[22] Perhaps, then, the reason why the Greek equivalent for such settings, βαπτίζω, shows up in the inter-testamental period (which is crucial background for New Testament

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[20] See further verse 26, "So if a man fasts for his sins, and goes again and does the same things, who will listen to his prayer? And what has he gained by humbling himself?" The bodily ordinance is important, but the soul must comply.

[21] For more references, see Marcus Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (Brooklyn: Traditional Press, 1975), 516–17, showing that Rabbinic Aramaic used the equivalent √*t-b-l* (unlike the Syriac New Testament, which uses forms from *'amad*, "to plunge"). Franz Delitzsch (d. 1890) translated the New Testament into Hebrew, making an effort to mimic what he thought would be Hebrew current in the first century; his regular words for βαπτίζω and cognates are forms derived from *tabal*. The Qumran sectaries did not use the verb *tabal* for such washings.

[22] Compare also Miqwaoth 5:6, using the Qal *tabal* for a person bathing himself to become clean, and Hiphil *hitbil* for a person bathing utensils (compare the use of βαπτίζω in Mark 7:4, as discussed below). In Yoma 7:3, 4, when a priest washes himself to perform priestly duties, the verb is *tabal*. The term is frequent elsewhere in the Rabbinic literature as well.

usage), is this development in Hebrew usage, from biblical to post-biblical Hebrew.

This development explains why New Testament authors use the Greek word "baptize" for Jewish ceremonial washings in Mark 7:4 (ESV "wash . . . washing," applied to persons and to pots, pans, and couches); Luke 11:38 (washing before dinner); and Hebrews 9:10 (ESV "washings," applied to the body).[23] To a Jewish speaker, then, the word will commonly refer to a ceremonial application of water for the purpose of cleansing. Some suggest that the word itself implies that the ceremony involves *immersing* someone in the water, but that is probably not correct: after all, Ben Sira 34:25 has Numbers 19:11–13 as its background, where the water is "thrown." At the same time, surely the ceremony "drenches" the person being cleansed, and perhaps "ceremonial cleansing by drenching" is a decent paraphrase for the Greek and Hebrew terms.[24]

F. Circumcision and the Washings

We are building a case here that the proper background to Christian baptism is the system of Levitical washings. At the same time, it is conventional in Christian theology to see baptism as the replacement for circumcision as the rite by which one enters the people of God. In due course we will give redemptive historical reasons for this replacement; for now it would be helpful to consider whether there are conceptual parallels between circumcision and the Levitical washings.

To begin with, there is a threat of being "cut off from the people" if either rite is not applied when required: for example, Genesis 17:14 (circumcision); Numbers 19:13, 20 (washing). Second, both are generally

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[23] It is possible that Heb. 6:2 (ESV "washings") refers to such rites as well, in view of the plural noun; but it is also possible that Christian "baptisms" (ESV margin) are in view, since the list of verses 1–2 looks like basic Christian truths. The alternative "baptism" finds support in the way that verse 4 mentions "those who have once been enlightened," using a term (τοὺς φωτισθέντας) that patristic writers employ for baptism (see "Baptismal Realism in Church History" in part 2 of this article, and cf. Heb. 10:32 for further evidence that is what the author means); further, to speak of those who "have tasted" (vv. 4, 5), surely brings to mind the actual tasting of the Lord's Supper.

[24] The argument of Meredith Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), and followed by Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), that baptism (like circumcision) is a "sign of covenantal judgment ordeal" (Kline, 73), rather than a matter of cleansing, does not draw at all on these vocabulary usages, and, being thus methodologically unsound, will receive no further interaction here.

required for a person to eat safely from the various peace offerings: for example, Exodus 12:44 (circumcision for Passover); Leviticus 7:20 (the danger of eating while unclean).[25]

Third, consider Isaiah 52:1, where the prophet tells us of the restored and renewed Jerusalem, that "there shall no more come into you the uncircumcised and the unclean." In this poetic context, the two categories are probably referring to the same people (Gentile idolaters). Thus, both uncircumcision and uncleanness "defile" or "profane" the sanctuary: for example, Ezekiel 44:7 (admitting uncircumcised foreigners into the sanctuary *profanes* [חלל, *khillel*] the temple); Numbers 19:20 (the unclean person *defiles* [טמא, *timme'*] the sanctuary).

Finally, we can see that in both ordinances we have the sign/signified distinction. Deuteronomy 10:16 and 30:6 warn Israel against being content with a circumcision only of the body, and not of the heart. Proverbs 30:12, "There are those who are *clean* [*tahor*, טהור] in their own eyes but are not *washed* [*rukhats*, רחץ] of their filth," recognizes that those who use the ritual system must combine it with moral integrity (compare Ben Sira 34:25–26 as discussed above).

II. Baptism as Cleansing

A. New Testament Terminology

When New Testament authors speak of baptism, they use Greek words that correspond to Jewish Greek vocabulary for the Levitical washings. We have seen how the verb βαπτίζω, "to baptize" (with cognates), came into common use in Jewish circles to denote ceremonial washings; in this section we will see how another key term, λούω, "to wash" (and cognates), also appears in the New Testament to denote baptism.

For example, when Titus 3:5 refers to "the *washing* [Greek λουτρόν] of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit," most take that as a name for baptism—and thus we find discussions of whether it is a washing that *symbolizes* regeneration and renewal, or one that the Holy Spirit uses to *effect* it.[26] (See "Baptism and 'Regeneration'" in part 2 for more on

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[25] It is possible that, in some cases, the uncleanness was removed simply by waiting until sundown; usually, however, a washing was involved.

[26] Compare Calvin on Titus 3:5. Patrick Fairbairn (Scottish Free Church), *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (1874; repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956), 294, is not only emphatic about a baptismal reference here and at Eph. 5:26 (see below), but also indicates that all ancient interpreters found baptism in both places. Accordingly Liddell, Scott, Jones, McKenzie, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed., with revised supplement, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1061b (λουτρόν I.2), without qualification lists these two texts as referring to baptism.

"regeneration" in the New Testament.) Regardless of the outcome to that discussion, the term "washing" is one that we find in the rules for ceremonial washings (as in Lev 22:6 using the cognate verb). Identifying this washing with baptism gains credibility when we see that Ananias tells the new convert Paul to "be baptized and *wash away your sins* [ἀπόλουσαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας σου], calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). One may wish to take the "wash away" as some kind of figure, but the verb (ἀπολούω, a compound verb from λούω) is easily put within the context of Jewish washings; indeed, as Beasley-Murray has observed, "Josephus prefers the compound *apolouô* for ritual washing."[27]

Similarly, in Ephesians 5:25 we read of Christ, who loved the church and gave himself up for her; and in verse 26 we learn his purpose:

that he might *sanctify* her, having *cleansed* her by the *washing* of *water* with the word	ἵνα αὐτὴν *ἁγιάσῃ καθαρίσας τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος* ἐν ῥήματι

The terms "sanctify" (that is, consecrate to God, render administratively holy), "cleanse" (that is, change from an unclean to a clean state), "washing," and "water" all point to this ceremonial background, and the common identification of this with baptism makes good sense.[28]

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[27] G. R. Beasley-Murray, "λούω," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library), 1:151. For examples from Josephus, see *Jewish War* 2:129 (describing the Essenes); *Antiquities* 11:163 (describing Nehemiah's presumed custom of washing before going to the Persian king). On page 152 Beasley-Murray avers, "In Acts 22:16 *apolousai* indubitably refers to baptism. The similarity of language in 1 Cor. 6:11 indicates that it, too, has in view the cleansing of sins in baptism."

[28] Compare the commentary of Calvin on Eph. 5:26. Charles Hodge (American Presbyterian), *Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians* (1856; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 318–19, says, "Commentators, however, almost without exception understand the expression in the text to refer to baptism. The great majority of them, with Calvin and other of the Reformers, do not even discuss the question, or seem to admit any other interpretation to be possible. The same view is taken by all the modern exegetical writers. This unanimity of opinion is itself almost decisive. Nothing short of a stringent necessity can justify anyone in setting forth an interpretation opposed to this common consent of Christians. No such necessity here exists." Nevertheless some commentators have dissented, and Frank Thielman, *Ephesians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 383–84, provides the best argument for a "metaphorical reference to the cleansing power of the gospel." However, he considers it "a spiritual rather than a physical washing," without explaining why this opposition is meaningful or necessary, and thus the

Consider how Hebrews 10:22 admonishes its audience of Jewish Christians:

> let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience *and our bodies washed with pure water* [καὶ λελουσμένοι τὸ σῶμα ὕδατι καθαρῷ].

That this is likely a reference to Christian baptism (as opposed to a metaphorical reference to inner cleansing only) follows from two factors:[29] first, the mention of the *body* being washed *with water* seems to imply a bodily rite; second, the term "washed" appears elsewhere in the New Testament with reference to baptism (as above).[30] But consider what must lie behind this way of speaking: the idea of washing the body draws on Levitical terminology (e.g., Lev. 15:13; Num. 19:7–8; Deut. 23:12 LXX), and "pure [or clean] water" evokes Ezekiel 36:25–27, which employs cleansing imagery for what we have come to call "regeneration":

> I will sprinkle *clean water* [ὕδωρ καθαρόν] on you, and *you shall be clean* [καθαρισθήσεσθε] from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

I say more on this text from Ezekiel in "Ezekiel 36:25-27, John 3:5, and Baptism" in part 2; for now we simply notice that the terminology explicitly evokes the Levitical washings. All of this supports William

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possibility of a "physical" ceremony providing "spiritual" benefits does not enter into his discussion. In light of the Levitical ceremonial background for λουτρόν, it appears to me that Andrew Lincoln, *Ephesians*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1990), shows why the tradition is probably right: "The explicit mention of water suggests not simply an extended metaphor for salvation . . . but a direct reference to water baptism" (375). Further, since the object of the verbs is "her" (αὐτήν), that is, the church under the image of a bride, a reference to an ecclesiastical (namely, corporate, covenantal, and ceremonial) ordinance is indeed fitting.

[29] Compare the following commentaries, just for a sampling: William Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, Word Biblical Commentary 47b (Dallas: Word, 1991), 287; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 523–24; A. B. Davidson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1882), 212.

[30] See "Baptismal Realism in Church History" in part 2 of this article, which shows that patristic authors likewise described baptism as a washing.

Lane's comment, "The reference in [Heb. 10:22*b*] is almost certainly to Christian baptism, which replaces all previous cleansing rites."[31]

Finally, we may add 1 Corinthians 6:11, where Paul tells his audience:

> But you were washed [ἀπελούσασθε], you were sanctified [ἡγιάσθητε], you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

Not everyone agrees that this refers to the rite of baptism; but it makes sense against the backcloth of the Old Testament if we take "washed" as in Acts 22:16, and "sanctified" as in Ephesians 5:26 (made administratively holy, which is not the usage of the term in systematic theology).

B. The Jewish Origin of Christian Baptism

It seems reasonable to suppose, as the Gospels imply, that the Christian rite of baptism has its direct historical antecedent in the practice of John the Baptist. Debates continue over whether John received his practice from the washing ceremonies practiced at Qumran or from some other quarter (such as the Jewish practice of "baptizing" Gentiles who become proselytes).[32] The question is an interesting one, but for our purposes we do not need to have a definitive answer; we can instead recognize the world of thought behind all these rites, namely, the Old Testament and Jewish ideas of ceremonial washings. We are able to say that John, in baptizing, was telling his contemporaries that they were unclean and

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[31] William Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, 287. Peter Leithart, "Womb of the World: Baptism and the Priesthood of the New Covenant in Hebrews 10.19–22," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 78 (2000): 49–65, finds in this passage not only a baptismal reference, but also a foundation of baptism in the ordination of Levitical priests. Hence he takes baptism as the Christian's "ordination." I would say that the washing language that the New Testament uses is not restricted to priests; and if the allusion to "clean water" takes us to Ezek. 36:25–27, as it seems to, then the relevant cleansing is likely the cleansing from touching a dead body (see "Ezekiel 36:25–27, John 3:5, and Baptism" in part 2 of this article). Hence Lane's observation, based on a more general washing, stands.

[32] Many doubt whether proselyte baptism was actually in existence early enough to have shaped John's ministry; see D. S. Dockery, "Baptism," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1992), 55a–58b, at 56b: "There is, however, no clear evidence prior to A.D. 70 that proselytes underwent baptism as a requirement of conversion." Further, according to Hermann Lichtenberger, "Baths and Baptism," in *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. L. H. Schiffman and J. C. VanderKam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 85b–89a, "It cannot be proved that John derived his baptism from the Qumran rituals" (86a).

must not rely merely on their Jewishness to be ready for the One Who Comes. If we take a passage such as Luke 3:7–14 as an indicator, he was declaring that their uncleanness stemmed from presuming on the privileges of the covenant, when they did not translate those privileges into covenant reality. This left the people just as unclean as the more obvious practices of idolatry that Ezekiel denounced (Ezek. 36:25). John's solution, like Ezekiel's, was not to downplay the ceremonies; instead he sought the benefits that the ceremonies were given to mediate.

Thus we are able to say that the New Testament idea of baptism comes from an Old Testament and Jewish world of thought in which a ceremony with water effects a change of what we can call ritual or administrative status—from unclean, and thus not permitted into God's presence without great danger, to clean, that is, permitted into God's presence. An obvious difference between the Old Testament washings and Johannine and Christian baptism is the fact that the old washings were done repeatedly as needed, while baptism is done only once. This difference is one reason why I am concerned primarily with the world of thought behind both ceremonies, rather than trying to trace a direct antecedent.[33]

C. Baptism as a Parallel to Circumcision

It is common to say that baptism has replaced circumcision as the rite by which a person enters the people of God, often appealing to passages such as Colossians 2:11–12:[34]

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[33] Eckhard Schnabel has provided a lexical study: "The Language of Baptism: The Meaning of βαπτίζω in the New Testament," in *Understanding the Times: New Testament studies in the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of D. A. Carson on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday*, ed. Andreas J. Köstenberger and Robert W. Yarbrough (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 217–46. He concludes that "immerse" is a pretty handy gloss for the Greek verb in contexts ceremonial and otherwise; he also thinks that passages such as Rom. 6:3–5 use "extended and metaphorical senses" of βαπτίζω, not necessarily referring to water baptism (see below). Schnabel's results are undermined by the absence of any discussion of 1) the related words, such as λούω; 2) the usage of these terms in the LXX; and 3) the ceremonial world of thought, both in the Old Testament and in the New. (For more on why I think Schnabel's points are misguided, see footnote in section III.A below.)

[34] I have all my life encountered this as a traditional Christian position. One can find this argument in Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* III, Q.70, article 1; Calvin's commentary on Colossians 2:12, and, after a fashion, in N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1986), 104–106.

> In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

The "circumcision of Christ" (v. 11) is the union with Christ on display through baptism (v. 12). Baptism, then, is the way in which someone enters the people of God in the present era; this is why the Gentile audience of Colossians do not need to go further and become proselytes to Judaism.

This conventional parallel has its detractors, however. For example, Everett Ferguson, in his monumental work *Baptism in the Early Church*[35], several times contends that patristic writers reject a genuine connection between baptism and circumcision, and he agrees with the rejection. He tells us that Cyprian and his predecessors "treat circumcision and Jewish baptism as separate institutions with separate fulfillments in Christianity."[36] The fulfillment of circumcision is "spiritual circumcision," which baptism conveys. But surely a better explanation for this distinction is to recognize the seeds of a position stated clearly in, say, Aquinas, namely, that the sacraments of the "old law" only *signified* grace, while those of the "new law" *convey* grace.[37] And it is easy to see, in just about every case that Ferguson examines, the view that Christian baptism is superior to circumcision because it offers superior benefits.[38] Further, I would guess that the language of "sealing" that the patristic writers so commonly use for baptism (which Ferguson amply documents) probably owes something to the Pauline term "seal" applied to circumcision (Rom. 4:11)—a point that Ferguson does not even raise.

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[35] Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009). For more assessment of this important work, see "Baptizing Infants" in part 2 of this article.

[36] Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 273.

[37] See, e.g., Aquinas, *God's Greatest Gifts: The Commandments and the Sacraments* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 1992), 83, on the sacraments in general.

[38] J. P. T. Hunt, "Colossians 2:11–12, the Circumcision/Baptism Analogy, and Infant Baptism," *Tyndale Bulletin* 41, no., 2 (1990): 227–44, surveys the patristic material and concludes that early writers do not make an analogy between baptism and circumcision. Hunt himself allows *some* analogy between the two rites, but wants to deny that the analogy should be extended to include infants as proper recipients. Neither Hunt nor Ferguson considers the way in which the "household baptisms" echo the institution of circumcision in Genesis 17 (as described here).

Support for a true parallel between baptism and circumcision comes from the "household baptism" passages (e.g., Acts 16:15; 1 Cor. 1:16), which echo the "household circumcision" passage, Genesis 17:27 (see more discussion in "Baptizing Infants" in part 2). Further, baptism is explicitly said to incorporate someone into the people of God (e.g., Rom. 6:3–5, see discussion below), just as circumcision did.

In an earlier section we considered the conceptual parallels between circumcision and cleanness, and thus we have a conceptual world in which a ceremony that makes someone ritually clean can serve in place of circumcision to mark entry into the clean and holy people of God. We might offer a redemptive historical reason for why baptism is more suited to the Christian era. In the era before Jesus, membership in the people of God was generally tied to ethnicity (with some notable exceptions)—and circumcision, applied to the male organ of generation, fits that pattern. With the resurrection of Jesus and his coronation as the heir of David, the people of God are "internationalized" in a way unlike the previous era; for such a situation, circumcision would not be fitting, while a rite of cleansing that can be widely applied, in a variety of settings, is.[39]

Further along these lines is the likelihood that a rite of washing would be readily intelligible to most of the audience of this spreading Christian faith. The second-century Christian apologist Justin Martyr (*First Apology*, 62) mentions the way that pagan Gentiles wash themselves in connection with worship, finding in this practice a demonic anticipation and corruption of the true washing that would come with Christianity. And a reader of Herodotus (Greek historian, fifth century BC) discovers that various pagan peoples—such as Babylonians (1.198) and Egyptians (2.86)—practice ceremonial washings at various junctures. Presumably the Greeks who read the passages would also grasp the idea. Hence, Beasley-Murray's claim, "washing for ritual purification was common among ancient peoples of the Orient," is well founded.[40] I can easily imagine that a rite applicable to women as

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[39] I have mentioned above the tantalizing case of Naaman. We might also add the relative indifference to ceremonial fine points that we find in *Didache* 7, where the water source (running or not), temperature (cold or warm), and even amount (enough for a bath, or only for pouring on the head) are treated with equanimity: this, too, allows for application in a wide range of physical environments, which vary in how much water is available.

[40] Beasley-Murray, "λούω,"151. Consider also Josephus' assumption that Nehemiah would have washed before going to serve drink to the king of Persia (*Antiquities* 11.163). See further the entries in Gerhard Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976) 4:295–300 (λούω); 1:530–535 (βαπτίζω). The classic study is

well as men would also be suited to the spread of the people of God beyond previous ethnic boundaries, since women might believe in Christ apart from their husbands (1 Cor. 7:13).

D. Initial Conclusions

Several conclusions follow from our discussion of the ideological background to baptism. The first is that it is easy to see how baptism can be applied to the infant children of church members, marking their entry into the people of God much as circumcision did in the old era. But this is of course controversial among Christians, and I have given an outline argument for infant baptism in "Baptizing Infants" in part 2 of this discussion.

Second, there is good reason to suppose that the worldview factors discussed above in relation to ritual and moral status apply as well to baptism as they did to the Old Testament ceremonies. That is, we may suppose that realism *of some sort* is a proper expression of the worldview of the Bible, since the New Testament presupposes the same creation-based worldview; the changes in our era have to do with advancing God's purposes for all mankind through the kingly reign of Jesus, and this advance develops what the Old Testament itself had foretold. The saving purpose for mankind takes for granted our common humanity by virtue of creation as well as God's continuing commitment to his material creation.[41]

Further, we can see that Paul can denote people by their administrative status every bit as much as Leviticus can: in Ephesians 1:1 he calls his audience "saints" (that is, "holy people"), using the Old Testament term. What is striking about this letter is the way that *Gentile* believers in Christ share the same standing with Jewish believers (a feature of the letter: compare the "inheritance" terms in 1:11, 14, previously reserved for the native-born Israelite). He goes on to tell his Gentile readers that they are "no longer strangers and aliens," but they are "fellow citizens with the saints" (that is, with believing Jews).[42] The

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now J. Ysebaert, *Greek Baptismal Terminology: Its Origin and Early Development* (Nijmegen: Dekker & Van de Vegt, 1962).

[41] For more on this, showing how dependent New Testament thought is on the creation-based worldview of the Old, see my *Genesis 1–4*, 94–100, 129–132, 141–145, 185–186, 269–278.

[42] Paul uses terms from the Old Testament that describe the Gentile proselyte, who has a "second-class" standing among the covenant people: for "stranger" and "alien" compare Lev. 25:35 (ESV "sojourner"), Ruth 2:10 (ESV "foreigner"). The category, Paul says, is abolished, and Gentile believers are full citizens of the people of God—this is the great "mystery" that had been kept largely hidden (Eph. 3:6).

house (or household) of God "grows into a holy temple in the Lord" (v. 21).[43]

In the biblical worldview the cleansing ceremony effects a change in one's administrative status—a change that should be accompanied by moral vitality, and thus we have the sign/signified distinction (but not separation) with baptism as we did for the Old Testament ceremonies.

Evangelicals will often say that in texts like Ephesians, Paul is addressing people with "the judgment of charity"; that is, he *assumes* that his readers are "holy" and "fellow citizens" unless and until he should have good reason for thinking otherwise. Now, nothing in the texts themselves invites us to discover such a device in these passages; but, more positively, once we recognize how Paul is using terms from the Old Testament world, naming these Jewish and Gentile believers in the way that Israel was named in the old era, we can see that Paul's language is administrative. In this way we do not have to suppose that a "non-elect" reader in the Ephesian church is "not really holy," and we just did not know it before; we can say instead that he has failed to take hold of the benefits of his administratively holy status. Once again, we are faced with recognizing the difference between what biblical authors mean when they use their terms, and what we would mean if we used the equivalent terms. As we shall see, this will help us with the apparently indiscriminately realistic statements about baptism that we find in the New Testament itself.

III. Baptismal Realism

A. Baptism and "Union with Christ"

So far we have only spoken of "realism *of some sort*" for baptism and begun to indicate what sort that might be. Now let us see if that allows us to make sense of the New Testament passages about baptism.

Paul's statements seem to invite a realistic reading, do they not? Consider the following sampling:[44]

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[43] Perhaps this category of administrative status helps explain the ideas behind 1 Cor. 7:14, where the unbelieving spouse is "made holy" because of the believing one, and the children of such a union are not "unclean" but are instead "holy."

[44] Eckhard Schnabel, in "The Language of Baptism," 235–39, contends that the case of Rom. 6:3–5 is an instance of "metaphor," describing "the spiritual reality of death to sin and life to God" (238), and hence is not a matter of water baptism; he prefers the gloss "immersed" for "baptized." Of course in making this an *either*-water-baptism-*or*-spiritual-death-and-life situation, Schnabel is assuming things about physical ceremonies! More to my point, though, is Schnabel's lack of ceremonial categories altogether, and his assumption that

Romans 6:3–5. Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

1 Corinthians 10:2–5. [A]nd all [those who came out of Egypt] were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Galatians 3:27. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

Colossians 2:12. [H]aving been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.

Ephesians 5:26. [T]hat he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, . . .

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being "united to Christ" must mean the kind of union had by what *we* call "the regenerate."

Schnabel goes on to suggest that 1 Cor. 10:2–5 is likewise not a reference to water baptism, but again some kind of metaphor (241–42). He says, "Since Paul presents a typological interpretation of Israel's wilderness wanderings, a translation that preserves the clearly metaphorical meaning of βαπτίζω is 'all were immersed into Moses.'" However, this does indeed miss the burden of Paul's argument, probably because Schnabel has hampered himself with the word "metaphorical."

In 1 Cor. 10:1, Paul speaks of "our fathers" having "passed through the sea," a reference to crossing the Red Sea dry-footed. Their passage constituted a kind of "baptism," an appropriate image either because they went between the walls of water on either side, or were wetted by the spray; they were thus incorporated into the people of whom Moses was the leader and representative. But the point is that "nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased" (v. 5), because they did not have true faith—a situation that possibly confronts the Christian congregation in Corinth. The Corinthian Christians, like the Israelites before them, enjoyed privileges due to their membership in God's people, and these privileges obligate them to true faith. (See section III.B below for more on this dynamic.) Further, the New Testament authors so commonly speak realistically about baptism and its effects, including the ideas of cleansing and consecration (cf. Acts 2:38; Eph. 5:26; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:21), that we may properly speak of baptism as the ceremony of incorporation into the people. Hence it appears that Schnabel is mistaking *realistic ceremonial* statements for *metaphorical* ones.

> **Titus 3:5.** [H]e saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, . . .

Theologians have put these together to say that baptism "grafts" us into Christ, or brings us into some kind of "union" with Christ.[45] Consider, for example, the Scots Confession of 1560, article 21, an example of early Reformed thinking:

> Wee assuredlie believe that be Baptisme we ar ingrafted in Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his justice, be quhilk our sinnes ar covered and remitted.
>
> (We assuredly believe that by Baptism we are ingrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness, by which our sins are covered and remitted.)

This is all that the article says of the sacrament; the rest of it goes on to extensive discussion of the Lord's Supper, which was probably more controversial at the time. This is fair to the language that Paul himself used—provided we know what we mean by "union" or "ingrafting."

However, in Reformed theology "union with Christ" has come to have a very specific meaning; in other words, it is scientific language for a specific theological concept. It carries the notion of lasting participation in the life of Christ, on the part of the elect, and hence it cannot be dissolved. For example, the Westminster Larger Catechism, question 66, speaks of "that union which the elect have with Christ."[46] I am sure that this idea is both valuable and true; at the same time, if we read the Pauline texts with this definition of union in mind, we cannot explain such obvious pastoral issues as how a baptized person can commit apostasy (the concern of Paul in 1 Corinthians 10), or why parents must see to it that their baptized infants lay hold of the faith they profess.[47]

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[45] See "Baptismal Realism in Church History" in part 2.

[46] Taking the restrictive clause ("that . . . which") as allowing for other kinds of union.

[47] Some have interpreted Paul's "realistic" language in Romans 6 as referring not to *water* baptism, but to *Spirit* baptism (seeing a parallel with circumcision of body and circumcision of the heart). The reason I do not think that this is valid is two-fold: First, the language of Romans 6 is parallel with that in other texts, and its simple sense seems to be the rite of baptism. (This straightforward realism is also why I do not find another approach, namely, to suppose that these passages use the *sign* as a metonymy for the *signified,* compelling.) Second, the terms baptism and filling with the Spirit, as I shall show in another essay, refer not to the inner life (either regeneration or sanctification, to use conventional terms), but to being equipped and empowered for tasks in the service of the people of God. I admit that this is a distinction that Paul

The explanation comes from realizing that Paul did not generally speak the way a Reformed systematician would do. Rather, according to Paul's normal usage, to be a baptized member of the people of God is to enjoy familial privileges and spiritual influences (as another author would also put it, Heb. 6:4–6), advantages that obligate us to respond with living and lifelong faith. Union with the people of God, which is Christ's body, is therefore union with Christ, understood this way; in other words, the technical definition of "union" given above, which includes the question of indissolubility, does not really correspond to Paul's pattern of usage. We may get analytical and classify different levels of union, and this may help us; but Paul himself has not generally spoken this way.

In chapter 4 of the work of which this article is part, I made the case that generally in biblical language to be "in" someone is to be a member of the people that has that person as its covenant representative. I also made a few observations about John 15:1–8, where Jesus, in calling himself the "true vine," is claiming to embody the people of God: he *is* the true people of God, and to be a member of that people is to be "in him." The key in John is that one must "abide" (or *remain*) in Jesus, and it is possible that some will not (vv. 2, 6), in which case they must be removed. We do not have to suppose that John and Paul mean quite the same thing by their uses of "in Christ" terminology, although they seem pretty close; but they both can be taken as referring to someone administratively as a member of the people of God.

Christian theologians have been aware of the pastoral problem mentioned above, namely, when baptized people do not live as disciples; they appeal to "the judgment of charity" to warrant Paul's terms, just as with the "sainthood" terms in Ephesians. As with Ephesians, I do not think this quite captures what Paul is saying, however, and it may be taken to imply that "nothing happens" at all in those who are not elect, and that their union with the people of God is *only* external. I would prefer to say that Paul is speaking administratively, and not probing into

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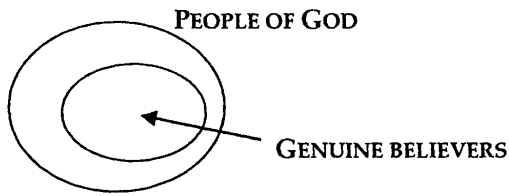
himself does not make; my promised essay will have to show why we need it anyhow.

Because my fuller treatment is yet to come to the light, at this point I will simply note that Acts 2 is the fulfillment of the promise in 1:5, 8, and Peter's speech is in the realm of what Paul calls "spiritual gifts." Further, "filled with the Spirit" is an Old Testament expression, appearing in Exod. 28:3; 31:3; 35:31; Deut. 34:9; and probably Mic. 3:8. It pertains to being equipped and enabled to serve the purposes of the people of God (which is what spiritual gifts are). See my "Ephesians 5:18: What Does πληροῦσθε ἐν πνεύματι Mean?," *Presbyterion* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 12–30.

the inner workings of the union and how it might be different for the elect and non-elect—but that does not imply that the union is not a real one. The appeal to the "judgment of charity" is based on, first, a recognition of the unqualified realism that we find in Paul; and second, the assumption that the realistic language bears the senses in which we are accustomed to using the words, an assumption that I think needs challenging.[48]

B. Baptism and Membership in the People of God

Perhaps we can see this better in the following diagrams. Here we see that the people of God are those who are marked out as his by the ordinances of the covenant—say, by circumcision and the sacrifices, or by baptism and the Eucharist. However, not everyone who has the external seals has the lasting internal reality of the covenant (circumcision of the heart). That is, we have two groups: those marked out as the people of God, and the subset who have the lasting reality:



The distinction we have already acknowledged, between the "sign" (the physical ceremony) and the "thing signified" (the spiritual benefit), recognizes this: circumcision or baptism would be the sign here, while genuine and lasting participation in the life of the people of God would be the thing signified (at its deepest level). Not everyone agrees that this distinction is valid, however: the Greek Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann considers it a part of the "Western captivity" of the church,

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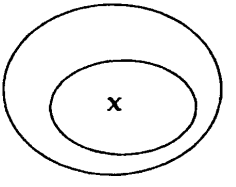
[48] In my view M. F. Sadler, *The Second Adam and the New Birth* (1862; repr., Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004) makes the valid point that Paul's language is just too realistic for us to be happy with this kind of "judgment of charity." Sadler uses the term "regeneration" to denote one's entry into the people of God, and distinguishes it from "conversion," at which one comes to a personal faith. This may have patristic antecedents; see "Baptismal Realism in Church History" in part 2 of this essay. I think my way of stating it captures the Pauline emphases without adding the further confusion of what these terms might mean in various theological schemes. I further contend in "Baptismal Realism in Church History" in part 2 that my treatment of this topic allows us to account for the very strong kind of "realism" that early Christian writers attached to baptism, without just dismissing it.

representing a post-patristic mental stance.[49] It does seem to be the case that the patristic writers rarely if ever make such a distinction, although it is hard to tell whether that is due to their contentment with the language level of the Bible, or to their possibly over-realistic reading of that language (see "Baptismal Realism in Church History" in part 2). In any case the features of life in the people of God (discussed in chapter 3 of the fuller work) virtually force the distinction upon us, and we have already seen how the distinction underlies biblical discussions of the ceremonies. The statement of Paul in Romans 2:28–29 is only a summary of what the prophets had insisted on:

> For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical. But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.

As already noted, we must *distinguish between* the sign and the signified, but we must not fall into the common Western evangelical trap of *separating* the two. That is, the sign serves the purposes of God in bestowing, at some level, what is signified. In the case of the rite of initiation, it serves that purpose by incorporating someone into those who are marked out as the people of God.

Consider now the disputes about what the rite of baptism does, particularly with infants. Those who advocate "baptismal regeneration" (if we use "regeneration" in the sense current in Protestant systematic theology)[50] would say that baptism puts a person into the inner circle; this alone, they say, does justice to the biblical language:



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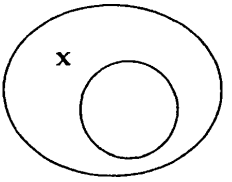
[49] Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 135–51. Cyril of Jerusalem, however, in his *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments* (mid-fourth century AD), describes Simon Magus as having been baptized, but not enlightened—allowing that one can receive the sign without the signified (see "Baptismal Realism in Church History" in part 2 for text).

[50] We should note, since we are aware of the varieties of language, that there are other senses of the term "regeneration" in the biblical and theological literature, as I discuss in "Baptism and 'Regeneration'" in part 2.

The obvious objection to this is that it raises the question of what happens when a baptized person fails to live out the faith: How can "regeneration" be lost?

Hence there are many who practice infant baptism who wish to solve the problem by saying that all covenant children must be converted *after* their baptism. In other words, the baptism puts the infant in the outer circle but not yet in the inner:



A serious objection to this is its likely impact on Christian child-rearing if carried through logically, namely, we could not presume to teach our children to pray, since we "know" that they are not "really" believers! Further, it makes baptism mean something different for an infant than it does for a professing adult.[51] Finally, this way of looking at it ignores the obvious realism of the biblical passages in order to address a pastoral problem.

Actually, neither of these two approaches does justice to the biblical language or thought world. The fact is, though we can assert that there is an inner circle and that God knows who is in it and who is out, we humans are not ordinarily privy to such information. In other words, we see just the people of God, who are phenomenologically and administratively described as those in union with Christ.[52] And baptism puts a person, infant or anyone else, into the only circle that we can see:

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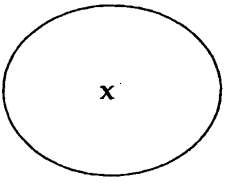
[51] I acknowledge the influence here of Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 215: "It is significant that [John Owen's] definition [of baptism] is serviceable both for the baptism of adults upon profession of faith, and of infants of believing parents—a matter of some importance which was on occasion forgotten in the later development of the doctrine of baptism within the tradition of Owen's theology." In footnote 4 Ferguson supplies some examples of those who forgot this principle.

[52] In other words, the principle of 1 Sam. 16:7, "man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart," simply summarizes an aspect of the Creator-creature distinction. We creatures should be content with our creaturely status.



Everyone who is a member of this people of God—baptized infant and adult alike—has the responsibility to lay hold of the covenant blessings from the heart, and to grow and persevere in faith and obedience.[53] In some cases, and perhaps many depending on the condition of the people of God, this will require the baptized child to "come to faith" in a decisive manner. I do not see that as being normative, however; the Bible leads me to expect that a covenant infant's faith normally begins earlier than adults are able to discern its presence (Ps. 22:9–10; 71:5–6; 139:13–16).[54]

Consider Galatians 3:26–27 from this perspective of membership in the people of God. There Paul tells his readers (most of whom are *Gentile* Christians):

> [F]or in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

Verse 27 is explaining verse 26 ("for"), and thus the baptism brings them into a standing where they are God's "sons" (υἱοί). Since Paul goes on in verse 28 to insist that their standing is not determined by their ethnicity, social position, or gender ("neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, no male and female"), it looks likely that Paul focuses on a *change* in God's administering of his people, borrowing his terms for describing this relationship from the Old Testament way of depicting ethnic Israel as God's "sons" (see Deut. 14:1; Isa. 1:2; 43:6; 45:11; cf. Mal. 1:6, all using υἱός in LXX). I suspect that this usage derives from Israel's position as God's "son" (Exod. 4:22–23, etc.), with the members therefore called

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[53] Thus, for a baptized person to fail to live out a genuine faith is apostasy, which means that it incurs a far worse judgment than for a non-believer from outside the covenant. The anomaly is horrifying because it is so offensive to the God of the covenant. It is also mystifying: how could it happen in the face of so many benefits and privileges?

[54] There is no biblical reason to identify the presence of faith either with our ability to detect it or with a person's ability to articulate it well—although of course such articulation is desirable as a pastoral goal. See further my essay, "Psalm 139:14: 'Fearfully and Wonderfully Made,'" *Presbyterion* 25, no. 2 (1999): 115–20.

"sons." Sonship of this sort is an administrative status, and does not imply that each "son" has profited from God's grace as he or she should have done. Probably this explains Paul's reference to Israel's "adoption [as sons]" (υἱοθεσία) in Romans 9:4—a privilege that Galatians is at pains to insist now comes to Gentile believers as much as it does to Jewish believers (cf. Gal. 4:5).

The baptized have the help of God to persevere, particularly as that help is mediated through their fellowship with the people of God. By "fellowship" I mean more than simply "companionship": I mean "mutual participation in the life of the body," which includes a share in the covenant ordinances and the grace on display there.[55] A wise Presbyterian elder, Mr. Frank Brown of St. Louis, expressed the idea perfectly. In regard to the effect of baptism he asked, "Why can't we just say that this is all in God's hands?" In other words, those who want to work with the inner circle part of the diagram—in either of the two models mentioned above—are probing beyond what is accessible to them and would be better off silent. Indeed, the fact that the Bible goes no further than this could be taken as God's guidance for us to be satisfied with this way of seeing it, to rest content with our creaturely condition.

Another critique that applies to both the "baptismal regenerationist" and the "conversionist" models is that they are too individualistic. If we follow a redemptive-historical approach, we will prefer to think in terms of the people of God and the notion of membership in it, and the privilege and responsibility of participation from the heart that each member has (as described above).

I suggest that looking at things this way also allows us to understand 1 Peter 3:21, which says bluntly, "Baptism saves you." Here it is in context:

> because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. *Baptism,* which corresponds to this, *now saves you* [ὑμᾶς . . . νῦν σῴζει βάπτισμα], not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good

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[55] In saying this I have not tried to slip in a "paedocommunion" position, though I do in fact hold to it. It is possible to argue that one exercises those privileges in a manner appropriate to one's age, though I do not think that one can really disprove paedocommunion with such an argument. My position is based on my understanding of the covenant rite of the Eucharist as the Christian peace offering, on which see my essay, "The Eucharist as Christian Sacrifice: How Patristic Authors Can Help Us Read the Bible," *Westminster Theological Journal* 66 (2004): 1–23 (esp. 16–17).

> conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

As Charles Bigg noted, "σῴζει βάπτισμα [baptism saves] is a strong phrase." This is indisputably true; but more controversially, Bigg goes on to conclude, "Baptism is not merely an outward and visible form, but *an inward and spiritual grace*."[56] Donald Carson provides a common recourse for those of more evangelical convictions: "Christian baptism . . . regularly stands *by metonymy* for salvation," that is, the symbol is used for the thing signified.[57]

Actually, I do not think either of these alternatives is adequate, because they assume a sense of "save" that is more technical than the context of 1 Peter requires. If we recognize that the term "save" in the Bible can have a wider range of meanings than it does in modern Christian usage, then we can recall that it can be used in reference to membership in the people of God (see chapter 5 of the fuller work). This gives us an intelligible reading: baptism brings "you" into the people of God, the sphere of "salvation." This makes sense of Peter's reference to the risen Christ, who is the now-installed Davidic king and representative of this people.

In the same way, when Peter in Acts 2:38 tells the crowd, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins*" (μετανοήσατε καὶ βαπτισθήτω ἕκαστος ὑμῶν ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ *εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν*), he means that the baptism is the way of entry into the new people of God, which is the place characterized by the forgiveness of sins. That is, we should not understand Peter as implying that baptism automatically conveys forgiveness in an individualistic sense, but that it ushers one into that people whose very life depends on forgiveness.[58]

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[56] Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1901), 165 (italics added).

[57] Donald A. Carson, "1 Peter," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 1015–45, at 1039a (italics added).

[58] A modern evangelical would stress the first command, "repent," as the key condition for forgiveness. If Peter's concern were a strictly individual one, that might make sense; but since he goes on to require baptism in addition to repentance as the means of entry, the explanation given here works better. In any event it is clear that Peter would not have shared the bias of many modern evangelicals that the heart ("repent") is what matters and the ceremony ("be baptized") is not particularly important.

We can run into further linguistic difficulties with the word "efficacy." If we take the term in its ordinary language sense, we can say that proper baptisms are objectively "effectual" in that they ritually incorporate a person into the people of God. However, there is a technical sense alongside of the ordinary one, as in the Westminster Confession of Faith 28.6: "the *efficacy* of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered." The technical sense is that of conveying the thing signified in the deepest way, namely, "regeneration." But this technical sense does not entail the unbiblical position that "nothing at all happens" with the non-elect (see further "Baptismal Realism in Church History in part 2).

What, then, of the traditional practice of calling baptism a "christening," and of saying that the baptized are "Christians"? Is this way of talking biblically justified? As usual, it all depends on what we mean by our words. For starters, we should recognize that the actual word "Christian" only appears three times in the New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Pet. 4:16), each time designating one who professes faith in Jesus. Modern evangelicals use the expression "to become a Christian" to mean "to be converted"; that is, the phrase denotes entry into the inner circle in our people-of-God diagram. But whereas we should of course recognize the way people will hear what we say, and we should avoid misunderstanding as much as we can, we do not have to allow modern evangelical usage to have a monopoly on how we use our terms, provided there is something to be gained by swimming against its tide. In the case of baptism, I suggest that there is a gain. Baptism is what marks a person out as a member of the people of God, and thus it corresponds to "God's name being called over someone"; that is, the people "over whom God's name is called" (typically rendered as "called by God's name," compare 2 Chron. 7:14; Acts 15:17 [using Amos 9:12]; James 2:7) are those who have received the sign of incorporation.[59] We may think of the name of Christ being called over the one baptized,[60] that is, we may call such a person a Christian. This phrase refers to administrative status, to membership in the people for whom Christ is their Master.

IV. Conclusion

By now it should surprise no one that I think that C. S. Lewis has made the most helpful observations on this subject as on so many others:

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[59] See also Isa. 63:19; Jer. 14:9; 15:16; Dan. 9:19.

[60] Compare Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 61.10, who describes the name of God being pronounced over the one baptized.

> Now if once we allow people to start spiritualising and refining, or as they might say "deepening," the sense of the word Christian, it too will speedily become a useless word. In the first place, Christians themselves will never be able to apply it to anyone. . . . We do not see into men's hearts. We cannot judge, and indeed are forbidden to judge. It would be wicked arrogance for us to say that any man is, or is not, a Christian in this refined sense. . . .
>
> We must therefore stick to the original, obvious meaning. The name Christians was first given at Antioch (Acts xi.26) to "the disciples," to those who accepted the teaching of the apostles. There is no question of it being restricted to those who profited by that teaching as much as they should have. . . . When a man who accepts the Christian doctrine lives unworthily of it, it is much clearer to say he is a bad Christian than to say he is not a Christian.[61]

Indeed, in the light of our study here, we are far better off saying that those baptized who fail to embrace the covenant for themselves are properly called "apostates" rather than "pagans." Thus there can be a gain in calling a baptism a christening, because it can impress upon all those present the obligation that all members of the people of God have, namely, to see that they and those they love lay hold of the grace of God and abide in the life of faith, repentance, and obedience.

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[61] C. S. Lewis, "Preface," *Mere Christianity*, 10–11.