

## The History of Baptism Part 1

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### The History of Baptism from Paul to Luther

"Fifty million Frenchmen can't be wrong." Some may use this adage seriously, but to others it is a sarcastic way of saying that truth cannot be decided by majority vote—a point driven home by Paul in Romans 3:4, "Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar."

Historically, those associated with the conservative branches of the Restoration Movement have enthusiastically accepted Paul's admonition, being content to hold on to certain theological convictions, even if they perceived themselves to be in the minority. This is no doubt still true for many. However, many among us recently seem to have adopted a very different attitude with respect to baptism: "Fifty million evangelicals can't be wrong."

The thinking is that, if practically the entire evangelical world thinks God bestows saving grace as soon as the sinner believes and repents, then there must be some truth there. If evangelicals agree that baptism is simply the new Christian's obedient expression of or witness to his new status as a member of the body of Christ, then there must be something wrong with the "minority" view that baptism is the point of time when God gives salvation. Surely, 50 million evangelicals can't be wrong!

Yes, they can; and I believe they are. Long ago I decided to accept the Bible alone as my only norm for faith and practice. And long ago I became convinced that everything the New Testament says about the meaning of baptism can be summed up thus: water baptism is the God-appointed time when he first gives saving grace to the believing, repentant sinner.

Should we then just ignore the standard evangelical approach to baptism? Not at all. We need to understand what evangelicals are saying, and why they are saying it. All our doctrinal convictions, while grounded ultimately upon the Bible alone, should be developed in full view of past and present Christian thinking. A knowledge of the historical development of any

doctrine is extremely valuable; it can enrich our understanding as well as help us avoid serious doctrinal errors.

This is especially true of baptism. Too often, our historical perspective on this doctrine is much too limited. We tend to see ourselves within the context of the last 200 years.

We know that the early Restorationists rejected the prevailing denominational (e.g., Presbyterian, Baptist, Methodist) views of baptism, and came to see baptism as having a key role in the reception of salvation. Now, two centuries later, some are wondering if they went too far. After all, was it not a bit presumptuous of the Campbells, Walter Scott, John Smith, et al., to reject the traditional consensus view of baptism and come up with a new and opposite view? Why should we stick with these innovators, rather than just blend in with the "50 million evangelicals" who are continuing the traditional view?

### The New View

What I will say now may surprise some, but the truth is this: the modern evangelical view of baptism is actually the new view, an interpretation of baptism that was invented only in the early 1520s. It was created by the Swiss reformer Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531), developed further by John Calvin, and accepted throughout most of the Protestant world. Until Zwingli, the entire Christian world for the first 1,500 years of its history was in agreement: water baptism is the God-appointed time when he first gives saving grace to sinners. Exceptions to this belief were extremely rare, limited mostly to medieval dualist sects that rejected all physical forms of worship.

My plea here is that in developing our own convictions concerning baptism today, we will not limit our historical perspective to contemporary evangelicalism, or even to the last 200 years. Rather, let us be aware of the entire scope of Christian history. Let us understand what the original and true consensus view was, and who the real innovators are.

In the rest of this article I will survey the history of the meaning of baptism up to and including Martin Luther—a 1,500-year biblical consensus. In the next article I will explain how Zwingli changed everything.

## Early Writers

The pre-Augustinian writers were practically unanimous in their teaching that baptism is the point of time when salvation is given. Justin Martyr (A.D. 110-165) said that new converts "are brought to us where there is water, and are regenerated ... For ... they then receive the washing with water," as in John 3:5. "We have learned from the apostles this reason "for baptism: "in order that we ... may obtain in the water the remission of sins" (First Apology, 61). Tertullian (A.D. 145-220) said, "Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life" (On Baptism, iii). Also, "The act of baptism ... is carnal, in that we are plunged in water, but the effect is spiritual, in that we are freed from sins" (Ibid., vii). Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 315-386) said, "When going down ... into the water, think not of the bare element, but look for salvation in the power of the Holy Ghost" (Catechetical lectures, III:4). Many more examples could be cited.

## Augustine and Thomas Aquinas

Augustine (354-430) introduced a lot of new ideas into Christian thinking, but the saving significance of baptism was not one of them. Here he was simply continuing to teach what those before him had taught. Baptism, he said, is nothing else than salvation itself (A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, I:34); it "brings salvation" ((Letter 98, To Boniface, 1)). We are "saved by baptism"; "the salvation of man is effected in baptism" (Against Two Letters of the Pelagians, III:5). We are "joined to Christ by baptism"; indeed, a person "is baptized for the express purpose of being with Christ" (A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, I:55). The "apostolic tradition" teaches the "inherent principle, that without baptism ... it is impossible for any man to attain to salvation and everlasting life." (Ibid., I:34)

Thomas Aquinas represents medieval Catholic thinking. He declared that "no one can obtain salvation but through Christ ... But for this end is baptism conferred on a man, that being regenerated thereby, he may be incorporated in Christ ... Consequently it is manifest that all are bound to be baptized: and that without Baptism there is no salvation for men." (Summa Theologica,

68:1)

Martin Luther

Many have assumed that because Martin Luther opposed the Catholic doctrine of the sacraments and championed the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith, he must have been the one who rejected baptism as a salvation event. Nothing could be further from the truth. Luther's view of the meaning of baptism stands in direct continuity with the New Testament, the early church fathers, and the Catholic scholars who preceded him. He regarded baptism as a mighty work of God in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit pour out the full blessings of salvation upon penitent believers.

Specifically, Luther asserted that forgiveness of sins is initially bestowed in baptism. In his Small Catechism (IV:6), in answer to the question "What gifts or benefits does baptism bestow?", he says first of all, "It effects forgiveness of sins. This is part of the work of baptism; in it "the forgiveness takes place through God's covenant." (The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism) Forgiveness takes place in baptism because that is where the blood of Christ is applied to the sinner: "Through Baptism he is bathed in the blood of Christ and is cleansed from sins." (E.Plass, editor, What Luther Says, I:46)

According to Luther baptism brings not only forgiveness of sins but also a new birth, a change in the inner man that actually eradicates sin. For "it is one thing to forgive sins, and another thing to put them away or drive them out ... But both the forgiveness and the driving out of sins are the work of baptism." (The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism, 15). Thus it is appropriate to speak of baptism as the time when "a person is born again and made new." (Ibid., 3)

In short, Luther clearly proclaimed that baptism is for salvation: "Through baptism man is saved." (Ibid.,6) In answer to the question of the purpose of baptism, i.e., "what benefits, gifts and effects it brings," he gave this answer: "To put it most simply ,the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save." (The Large Catechism, IV:23,24) One is baptized so that he "may receive in the water the promised salvation." (Ibid., IV:36)

I refer to the view of baptism described here as the "biblical consensus." It is the view that baptism is principally the time when God himself is bestowing upon the penitent, believing sinner the benefits of the redeeming work of Christ. This is the New Testament's own doctrine of baptism, and it was affirmed to be such by 15 centuries of Christian writers.

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Foot Notes:

1 All the quotations given here—and more—can be found and documented in chapters

1 and 2 of *Baptism and the Remission of Sins*, edited by David Fletcher (Joplin: College Press, 1990).