

“We Confess One Baptism for the Forgiving of Sins”¹

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¹ ὁμολογοῦμεν ἐν βάπτισμα εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν / confitemur unum baptismum in remissionem peccatorum

Preliminary Remarks

What I hope to convey in this presentation is what all Christians can confess together regarding baptism. There is much that still divides us, sadly, but the mutual recognition of baptism in the Name of the Trinity among virtually all Christian communities today is one of the success stories of the modern ecumenical movement. It means that we consider one another to be Christians in the full sense of the word. No one is any “more” or “less” of a Christian than any other baptized person. Consequently, we all belong to the Church of Christ, the One Church we confess in the Creed.

1 BAPTISM AND THE ORIGINS OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

1.1 Baptism and the Kerygma

1.1.1.1 In his introduction to the series, Dr. Bloomquist explained how the basis of all early creeds was the Kerygma, the basic gospel message, the good news of salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah.

- (1) The most succinct expression of the Kerygma is the declaration, “Jesus is Lord!” (Ph 2:11). But normally, it includes mention of Christ’s death together with his resurrection.

1.1.1.2 Even though we don’t find baptism mentioned as an article in any of the early creeds (the first official mention of it is in the Symbol of Constantinople in 381), baptism was very closely associated with the Kerygma from the very beginning—in three ways:

- (1) Undergoing baptism was the expected response of people to the Kerygma: let’s look at Acts 2:36–38 (cf. Acts 8:12-13; 8:36-37; 18:8).
 - The Kerygma, when it is authentically proclaimed and correctly understood, is a life-changing truth. Repentance and baptism encapsulate the existential change that is required of those who have come to believe in the Name of the Lord Jesus.
- (2) The primitive Church required converts to make a brief verbal profession of faith (the content of which probably consisted of the Kerygma in some form) as an immediate prerequisite for baptism (see Acts 22:16; Rom 10:9).

(3) The baptism of Jesus himself by John the Baptist was considered the beginning of the Gospel story: Acts 1:22 (to have been around since the baptism of John was a prerequisite for replacing Judas among the Twelve); Acts 10:37; Mark 1:1.

- This reinforces the idea that to become a follower of Jesus one needs to be baptized.
- Even in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, which begin with an infancy narrative, the baptism of Jesus is seen as the inauguration of his public ministry (Matt 3; Luke 3: 21-23a).

1.1.1.3 It's very clear then, that baptism is inseparable from the Christian faith.

(1) And as Dr. Bloomquist's table shows, baptism provided the context within which the Christian creeds developed, even if later on creeds acquired the additional function of preserving orthodoxy.

- Even the Symbol of Constantinople was used (in the East) as a baptismal creed.

1.1.1.4 In the New Testament, there is an intimate association between faith and baptism. That pair is often found together explicitly: Gal 3:26-27; Col 2:12; Eph 4:5; Mark 16:16.

1.1.1.5 But even when they are not both explicitly mentioned, faith and baptism are so inseparable in the NT that their effects can be spoken of interchangeably: the effects of baptism are the effects of faith, and vice-versa.

1.1.1.6 This close association teaches us something about baptism: it is like a bodily confession of faith. It also teaches us about the nature of faith: it is not only a matter of inner convictions or opinions, but also an engagement of the whole person into a new way of life.

1.1.1.7 And the fact that the Christian life begins with faith and baptism tells us a great deal about what Christianity is: not simply a human enterprise, but a meeting-place of human and divine activity.

1.2 **The Ministry of John the Baptist**

1.2.1.1 Where did baptism originate? Clearly, in the ministry of John the Baptist, as attested by all four canonical gospels (Matt 3:6; Mark 1:4-5; Luke 3:3; John 1:26; 3:23).

- 1.2.1.2 Scholars have long debated the possible historical antecedents for this practice.²
- (1) The ablutions practised in the Dead Sea Community? But these were repeated + had to do with ritual purity, which according to the gospels was not a priority for Jesus and his followers.
 - (2) The same goes for the ritual purification prescribed by the book of Leviticus.
 - (3) Jewish proselyte baptism? But it is unclear whether this was actually being practised at that time; the evidence we have comes from later sources.
 - (4) Prophetic gesture (as in Jer 13; 18; Ezek 3)? Quite possibly.
- 1.2.1.3 We are so used to the figure of this wild prophet, with his coat of camel's hair and his diet of locusts + wild honey (Mark 1:6), that we forget just how radical he was.
- 1.2.1.4 Luke presents him as the son of a priest. If this was the case, then he would have been expected to step into that role, with its attendant status in society, wealth, etc.
- 1.2.1.5 But instead, he renounces that status + goes out into the wilderness, where the word of God falls upon him (Luke 3:2).
- 1.2.1.6 The wilderness is an archetypal place: the place of Israel's beginnings, when its faith was pure (cf. Hos 11:1, "When Israel was a child, I loved him"; 2:14, "I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her").
- 1.2.1.7 John stands at the Jordan, the threshold of the Promised Land, the boundary which the children of Israel crossed in order to take possession of the land of Canaan (Josh 4). He stands there + invites all Israel to re-enter the land, to become the Chosen People all over again.
- 1.2.1.8 They need to be cleansed of their sins, and this purification is urgent in light of imminent judgment by God. The end-time wrath of God is coming, and there will be no reprieve for the wicked.
- (1) The images John uses all connote violence: axe (Matt 3:10; Luke 3:9), winnowing fork, + unquenchable fire (Matt 3:12; Luke 3:17).
- 1.2.1.9 The people's one hope for salvation is to repent from their sins and bathe in the Jordan. (The common meaning of the Gk verb βαπτίζω is "to dip or plunge in water.")

² See Adela Yarbro Collins, "The Origin of Christian Baptism," *Studia Liturgica* 19, no. 1 (1989): 28-46.

- 1.2.1.10 Note that this has nothing to do with the Temple, the Levitical priesthood, sacrifices, observance of Torah, going to synagogue, or any of the other practices that Jews would have been familiar with. John the Baptist stands apart from virtually all the Jewish institutions of his day.
- 1.2.1.11 Jesus endorses John’s ministry totally, calling him the greatest “among those born of women” (Matt 11:11; I’m not sure what that means!!) or the “Elijah” prophesied by Malachi (Mal 4:5); and of course the greatest endorsement of all is Jesus’ receiving his baptism.

1.3 **The Baptism of Jesus**

- 1.3.1.1 The baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist is presented by the synoptic gospel writers as a model for Christian baptism, as it involves the descent of the Holy Spirit and a declaration of his divine Sonship.
- 1.3.1.2 This suggests that there was a conscious continuity between John’s practice and Christian practice.
- 1.3.1.3 The first disciples of Jesus (his “inner circle”), according to Acts and the Fourth Gospel, appear to have previously been disciples of John.
- 1.3.1.4 Yet clearly, even if the form (the outward gesture) was the same, in terms of content “something more” is included in Christian baptism—as evidenced by the story of the small group of disciples Paul finds in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-6) who have “never even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” He rebaptizes them: so John’s baptism was not considered to be sufficient for believers in Jesus.

2 **THE SPECIFICITY OF CHRISTIAN BAPTISM**

2.1 **“More” than the Forgiveness of Sins**

- 2.1.1.1 Although “forgiveness of sins” is certainly included in the meaning of Christian baptism, that effect doesn’t by itself signify what is unique about Christian baptism.
- 2.1.1.2 On the handout entitled “Effects of (Faith and) Baptism,” I have attempted to gather together all the images and metaphors used in Scripture and the early Fathers to express the significance of Christian baptism; and I have distinguished between “primary” and “further” effects.
- 2.1.1.3 The reason for this distinction is that what I call the “primary” effects impart a new identity to the baptized person, whereas the “further”

effects—which are not in any way secondary!—really flow out of the primary ones.

- 2.1.1.4 You will notice that the primary effects are all relational: baptism brings about the beginning of a new relationship with the Person of the Son, with the Person of the Father, with the Person of the Holy Spirit, and with all the created persons who together and singly are in relationship with the Blessed Trinity—which is the Church of Christ, the Church we profess in the Creed.
- 2.1.1.5 The primary effects are a “package deal”: you can’t have one without the others. You can’t be a child of God but not a temple of the Holy Spirit, etc.

2.2 **Primary Effects**

2.2.1 *Belonging to/Identification with Christ (Gal 3:27; cf. 2:19-20)*

- 2.2.1.1 Saint Paul expresses the union of each baptized person with the Person of Christ in very vivid and immediate terms: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (Gal 3:27). It doesn’t get any closer than that!
- 2.2.1.2 And this union means that the pattern of Christ (including his life, death, and resurrection) has been imprinted upon us. We have been configured to him. He is not simply an external model that we strive to imitate from a distance, but a vine onto which we have been grafted (John 15:5). His dying and rising are continually at work within us (2 Cor 4:10-11), so that in life or death we are the Lord’s (Rom 14:8).
- 2.2.1.3 So baptism includes within itself the call to discipleship. That following of Jesus is the working out, the living out of the fundamental meaning of baptism. I must become more and more like the one who has united himself with me.
- 2.2.1.4 Our identification with Christ also means that the baptized are called to lay down their lives for the sake of the one who was given up for their salvation. Martyrdom, a kind of “baptism of blood” (see Mark 10:38-39), is like a logical counterpoint to baptism with water.
- 2.2.1.5 When we read in the Acts of the Apostles that the first converts were baptized in(to) the “Name” of Jesus Christ/the Lord Jesus (Acts 2:38; 10:48; 19:5; 22:16; see also 1 Cor 1:13-16; 6:11; Gal 3:27; Rom 6:3) this does not refer to a formula spoken by the person doing the baptizing (e.g. “Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ”). Rather, it refers to the conviction that being baptized inserts a believer into the mystery of the Risen Jesus.

- (1) This is more clearly indicated in the Pauline epistles.
- 2.2.1.6 When we read the Great Commission in Matt 28:18-19, with its command to baptize the nations “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” we modern Christians spontaneously think Jesus is giving them a formula to recite when performing a baptism—because that’s what we do (and have been doing for many centuries).
- 2.2.1.7 But we know from the historical evidence that the early Church (until the seventh century) did not interpret the Trinitarian formula of Matt 28:19 (also found in *Didache* 7:1-4) as something that was meant to be repeated word-for-word.
- (1) I am not suggesting that the Trinity was not invoked at baptism until the 7th cent. It’s just that the divine Persons were confessed or invoked separately, rather than in a single continuous formula.
- (2) The earliest texts speak of a threefold confession of faith by the catechumen (corresponding to the divine Persons), in which each confession is followed by an immersion (e.g. *Apostolic Tradition* 21).
- 2.2.1.8 Jesus’ words in Matt 28 were taken to refer primarily to the effect of baptism, namely, inserting a person into the mystery of the Godhead.
- 2.2.1.9 In any case, we don’t have to see any kind of contradiction between the command of Jesus in Matt 28 + the practice of the apostles in Acts, when they were baptizing “in the name of Jesus.” It’s just a difference of emphasis regarding the meaning of baptism. If Jesus is the Son of God, now reigning gloriously at the right hand of the Father, then to be immersed in the mystery of the Risen Lord is necessarily also to be immersed in the mystery of God.
- 2.2.2 *Gift/Indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5; 2:38; Rom 8:9-11)*
- 2.2.2.1 The Fourth Gospel presents John’s baptism, a baptism “with water,” as a preparation for a further baptism “with [the] Holy Spirit” (John 1:26, 33).
- 2.2.2.2 The future gift of the Spirit is a recurring theme in this gospel (3:5; 7:37-39; 19:30). It is clearly meant to be understood as included in Christian baptism, which is a combination of both water and Spirit.
- 2.2.2.3 The book of Acts also establishes a contrast between those two baptisms (1:5). Luke very clearly identifies Pentecost as the fulfilment of Jesus’ promise for the 120 believers who had gathered together.

- 2.2.2.4 In the sermon he preaches on that day, Peter explains that the gift of the Spirit is for each and every person who accepts the gospel and receives baptism (Acts 2:38).
- 2.2.2.5 So it would be incorrect to understand “Spirit baptism” as a reality that is meant to be separate from baptism in the name of Jesus. What happens in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:44-49) is not really an exception, because although the gift of the Spirit happens first in this case (as God’s way of indicating that non-Jews who believe are acceptable to him), the immediate reaction of Peter is that baptism should be given (10:47). And it is given on the spot (10:48).
- 2.2.2.6 Logically, forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit are meant to go hand-in-hand. To think that God would make us his temples—by cleansing and sanctifying us through the waters of baptism—but then leave us without his Presence doesn’t make sense. Temples are not meant to remain empty (see 1 Cor 6:19).
- 2.2.2.7 I’d really like to emphasize that the gift of the Holy Spirit is a permanent reality within us. Jesus promised, “I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you” (John 14:16-17).
- 2.2.2.8 The Spirit is my constant friend and companion, advocate and guide. He is more intimate to me than my own faculties. Even if my memory should fail, the Spirit will not fail me. Even if my eyesight should fail, the Spirit will not fail me. (Etc.)
- 2.2.2.9 The gift of the Holy Spirit is the birthright of all Christians and of every Christian. It is not reserved for some spiritual elite.
- 2.2.2.10 It does not depend on whether we “feel” the Spirit’s presence at any given moment. Nor does it depend on external, visible manifestations of the Spirit, as in the spiritual gifts, often nowadays called “charisms,” discussed by St Paul in 1 Cor 12 and 14.
- 2.2.2.11 The reason for this is that, as Paul teaches, “To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12:9). We can expect that the common good of the Christian community will definitely vary from place to place and from time to time. As the Church grows and spreads throughout the world, not all the gifts will need to be exercised in the same way in every circumstance.
- 2.2.2.12 Paul asks a series of rhetorical questions at the end of 1 Cor 12: “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?” (12:29-30). Clearly, these are meant to be answered in the negative.

2.2.2.13 So although Christians must be taught to desire the spiritual gifts, we shouldn't expect that these will all be manifested at the moment of baptism.

2.2.3 *Adoption by God (the Father) (Gal 3:26; 4:6-7; John 1:12; 1 John 3:1)*

2.2.3.1 Through faith in the Son of God, we enter into his very own relationship with the One he called his Father (cf. John 20:17). We are "sons in the Son." There is no greater dignity imaginable in this world. If we are sons, then we are also heirs of God, co-heirs with Christ (Rom 8:17). Everything in creation is ours (1 Cor 3:22-23)!!

2.2.3.2 Baptism thus brings about a fundamental equality: between Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free people, male and female (Gal 3:28). It "levels the playing field." There is no higher status in the Church than to be baptized.

(1) Ministry (δουκονία) in the Church, properly understood, places persons not above but at the service of their brothers and sisters (see Luke 22:24-27).

2.2.4 *Incorporation into the (ecclesial) Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:13)*

2.2.4.1 Notice the "our" in "Our Father." There is no place for a "me-and-Jesus" spirituality. To be immersed in the mystery of the Trinity is necessarily and simultaneously to be placed in relationship with all other believers throughout time and space.

2.2.4.2 We are not joining some faceless, undifferentiated crowd. Through baptism we become members of a living organism, the Body of Christ. As St Paul explains so persuasively, in this Body every member has a specific function: hand, foot, ear, eye, etc. Our challenge is to find our proper place + flourish there ("Bloom where you are planted"), maintaining our connectedness with the other members of the Body.

2.3 **Further (Not Secondary!) Effects**

Sources: NT, Didache, Justin (100-165 ce), Irenaeus (130-200), Clement of Alexandria (150-215)

2.3.1 *WASHING, PURIFICATION FROM SIN (NT passim, Dial. Tryph., Adv. haer.)*

2.3.2 *ENLIGHTENMENT (Heb 6:4; 10:32; 1 Pet 2:9, 1 Apol., Dial. Trypho)*

2.3.2.1 This is an aspect that it would probably be important to stress in today's culture, when so many are seeking "enlightenment" elsewhere than in Christianity: Eastern religions, New Age, pseudo-mysticism, etc.

2.3.2.2 If they want enlightenment, we have some to offer! This is real knowledge of God, which comes from gazing with unveiled faces on the glory of God (2 Cor 3:18), shining on the face of Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

2.3.3 *REBIRTH/REGENERATION (Titus 3:5; John 3; Acts 2:38, 1 Apol.)*

2.3.3.1 This effect is the first mentioned in Article XXVII of the XXXIX Articles: "Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from others that be not christened, but it is also a sign of Regeneration or new Birth [. . .]."

2.3.3.2 This image highlights the fact that the gift of God's grace to us is not an improvement of something already good, or a mere heightening of our natural human abilities: it is a completely new beginning; it is bringing to life something that was dead (Eph 2:5); it is a "new creation" (2 Cor 5:17).

2.3.4 *DEATH AND RESURRECTION (Rom 6:3-11; Col 2:12; 3:3-4)*

2.3.4.1 The symbolism of water suggests not only life, but death (as frequently expressed in the Old Testament (e.g. Ps 69).

2.3.4.2 In Rom 6 Paul develops the idea that to be baptized is to die with Christ.

2.3.4.3 By the fourth and fifth centuries, this became the dominant interpretation of the baptismal immersion, everywhere in the Church.

2.3.4.4 We see this understanding reflected in the design of early baptismal fonts and the practice of immersion. The fonts were deep enough (w/steps going down) to evoke the idea of burial/drowning.

2.3.4.5 In the Middle Ages generally, this aspect of baptism tended to fade into the background, in favour of the aspect of cleansing from sin. Well into the twentieth century, the celebration of baptism in the RCC was a sombre affair, very much focussed upon deliverance from evil and sin.³

³ <http://www.sanctamissa.org/en/resources/books-1962/rituale-romanum/09-baptism-of-children.html>

2.3.5 *SEALING (2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:13-14; 4:30; Rev 7:30)*

2.3.5.1 The imagery of the seal is taken from the realms of commerce and law: something that is sealed is guaranteed. The gift of salvation is something guaranteed to us by our baptism. We ourselves have been “officially approved” by God.

2.3.5.2 In the NT this image is often associated with the gift of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 1:22), although it is not the *only* effect of baptism that is associated with the Holy Spirit.

(1) In later Western theology, however, the seal would be symbolized by a separate ritual gesture, an anointing w/chrism on the forehead seen as imparting the gift of the Holy Spirit—the origin of our sacrament of confirmation.

2.3.5.3 The image of the “seal” also symbolizes possession. We belong to God, who has redeemed/ransomed us (i.e. bought us out of slavery).

2.3.6 *CLOTHING WITH A NEW SELF (Col 3:9-10; Eph 4:22-24)*

2.3.6.1 We can understand how themes like this one readily lend themselves to being “acted out” ritually.

2.3.6.2 Catechumens would enter the baptistery wearing their ordinary clothing, then strip naked, get anointed (whole body) w/oil, go down into the water; + once they came out again, they would be clothed w/a white garment, symbolizing the new self.

2.3.7 *ANOINTING (1 John 2:20,27)*

2.3.7.1 This theme is closely linked with the primary effect of Belonging/Identification w/Christ. The very word “Christ” means “anointed (one).” Just as Christ was anointed (with the Holy Spirit, Acts 10:38) at his baptism, so we too are anointed + become little “christs.”

2.3.7.2 This image too was eventually acted out by actually anointing people, right before and after baptism.

2.3.8 *DEIFICATION (Adv. Haer.)*

2.3.8.1 There is already in the NT an indication that we are called to share in the divine nature (2 Pet 1:4); but this idea would be taken much further in the patristic period, especially by the Eastern Fathers.

2.3.9 *PERFECTING (Clement of Alex.)*

2.3.9.1 This interpretation is not found in the NT. There is a truth to it, but we need to be careful not to overload the meaning of baptism. If we pack too much “perfection” into the sacrament, we will inevitably be puzzled and disappointed when we meet Christians who don’t look all that perfect! (Or when we deal with our own imperfections.)

2.3.9.2 Grace is truly given to us at the moment of baptism, but that grace still remains to be unpacked + lived out (cf. Phil 2:12; 3:12), in the midst of our ordinary, day-to-day lives. That is the challenge before us.

FOR FURTHER READING

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