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MTh in Applied Theology

A biblical assessment of the theology of the
Common Worship service of Holy Baptism.

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I. Introduction

§1 The renaissance of baptism

In recent years baptism has been ‘rediscovered’ as a sacrament. Over the centuries, it is claimed, baptism had become little more than a rite of birth, or ‘the gateway to the eucharist.’¹ The sacrament’s life-long relevance had largely been replaced by the sacrament of penance.² Today however there is great optimism among ecumenical theologians for baptism to be *the* sacrament of unity.³ This ‘renaissance’ of baptism has led to the comprehensive overhaul of baptismal liturgy within many denominations. One example of this—indeed, the focus of this essay—is the Church of England’s *Common Worship*, which has recently been completed after a decades-long process of liturgical renewal.

These changes must be assessed against the Church of England’s own principles as a Protestant denomination. First among these is scripture as normative to the Christian faith, as stated in Article VI:

whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith.⁴

The Church of England also recognizes the importance of tradition, the Creeds and reason, but in this essay, we are focusing on scripture: is the theology of the service of baptism in *Common Worship* consonant with scripture? The Liturgical Commission—the body responsible for the service—claims to have used a ‘biblical framework’ in preparing the service. This essay is therefore intended to be a *biblical assessment* of the *biblical theology* of the *Common Worship* service of Holy Baptism. The title is limited to one ‘biblical’ to ensure the reader’s tongue is twisted slightly less.

Rather than assessing particular elements of the service, we will be looking at the broader theology of the service, with the help of the Liturgical Commission’s own commentary (Part II). In order to assess this framework, we will need to go to the Bible ourselves to build our own framework (Part III), which we can then use for our assessment (Part IV). The service will frame our discussion, but its theology will be subject to the critique of our own biblical theology.

Before we proceed, we must mention three things. First, this is ‘a’ biblical assessment of a service. We acknowledge that there is more than one way of reading and understanding the Bible; this essay is not intended to be a definitive account of baptism in the Bible. However we do regard it the most faithful way to understand baptism in the Bible. Second, we will not be addressing the issue of ‘baptism in the Spirit’. We assume that the Spirit is given in the same way as the other blessings of baptism. Third, while the baptism of infants is not the main focus of this essay, our account will lead us to make some brief comments in that direction when we conclude.

¹ *Common Worship: Initiation Services (CW:IS)*, 185.

² Tranvik, ‘Luther on baptism’, 79-80.

³ Spinks, ‘Luther’s timely theology’, 23.

⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer (BCP)*, 613-614.

II. Christ's Pilgrim People

§2 The shape of the service

In his *Companion* Bradshaw includes a history of baptismal liturgy, highlighting changes to the service and its shape.⁵ We shall not repeat that here, but take a brief look at the *current* shape of the service.

The *Introduction* summarizes the theology of baptism, emphasizing the work of God in baptism, his gift to us. Together with the *Collect* and the *Presentation of the Candidates*, it draws attention to the 'children of God', his 'faithful people', 'the community of faith'. It is emphasized that baptism is both the gift of new life to the individual, and her incorporation into the Church. The community is reminded of its duty to 'welcome', 'uphold', 'pray for' and 'walk with' the candidate, to be her 'example'.

The candidate and/or sponsors then make their *Decision*. This shifts the focus from the corporate ('we') to the individual ('I'); it is a personal statement of intent to answer God's call to turn away from darkness and sin, and towards the light and new life. The individual emphasis continues as the minister makes the *Sign of the Cross* on the candidate's forehead, who is encouraged to be a valiant 'disciple of Christ'.

The *Prayer over the Water* once again stresses the incorporation of the candidate into Christ's 'fellowship', and prays that she may continue to grow and 'walk by the light of faith', as before in the *Presentation of the Candidates*. It is here that the work of God in baptism is made most explicit in the service:

Parallel to the eucharistic rite, the *Prayer over the Water* is, arguably, the central prayer of the rite and, without doubt, the one which most clearly and concisely expresses the theology of the sacrament.⁶

Before the candidate are actually baptized, she and the whole community 'profess together' the 'faith of the Church', using a form of the Apostles' Creed. To candidates 'who can answer for themselves', the question is put: 'Is this your faith?' Once baptized, the candidate can (optionally) be clothed with a white robe, and is told she has been received into the Church. It is prayed she might continue in faith all her life.

At the *Commission* the congregation is reminded of their duty to help and encourage, pray, teach and offer an example to each candidate. The parents and godparents especially are prayed for in this task. Candidates who are old enough make a further statement of intent to continue in the faith. This theme is completed at the *Blessing* ('The God of grace... establish, strengthen and settle you in the faith') and the *Giving of a Lighted Candle* ('You have received the light of Christ; walk in this light all the days of your life').

§3 The journey of faith

In its commentary on the service, the Liturgical Commission describes faith as a process, by which we: grow in our awareness of God and his work; enter into the Christian story through scripture; are nurtured by the Christian community; are equipped and commissioned for 'ministry and mission'. They develop

⁵ Bradshaw, *Companion*, 148-160.

⁶ Bradshaw, *Companion*, 167.

this further using three concepts: journey, story and pattern. First, *journey* is ‘a major image in the narrative of scripture from the call of Abraham through to the itinerant ministry of Jesus and beyond.’ It encompasses the need for both change and development, and recognises that not everyone’s journey is identical, though all are linked. This leads us to the second, *story*. Part of a Christian’s journey of faith is finding her story’s place within ‘the unfolding story of faith as it appears in the Church and in the scriptures.’ Finally, although each person’s story is different, there are *patterns* of belief, prayer and behaviour that ‘give structure and coherence to the Christian life.’⁷

So for the Commission, the service of baptism must do two things. First, it must ‘help candidate and community discover each other as partners within a common adventure of faith.’⁸ And second, it must express ‘the identity which is ours in Jesus Christ and the shape of the life to which we are called.’⁹ Baptism points us back to our true identity, character and calling; it is not limited to conversion.¹⁰ Reflecting this, the service focuses on the new way of life on which candidate is embarking, and on the Church community, receiving a new member and promising to walk with her on their common journey of faith.

The gift of new life is referred to as: ‘a new dignity’, as God calls us to ‘fullness of life’ (*Prayer of Introduction*); we are given ‘new life’, ‘born again’, and grow into the ‘full stature’ of Christ (*Collect*); we are urged to uphold the candidate in her ‘new life in Christ’ (*Presentation of the Candidates*).

The individual and common life, the story/journey of growth and development, is mentioned throughout: ‘that we... may... grow into the full stature of your Son’ (*Collect*); there is an opportunity for individual testimony from each candidate; we trust God for their ‘growth in faith’, we draw them ‘by [our] example into the community of faith’, ‘walk with them in the way of Christ’, in baptism they begin their ‘journey in faith’, we will help them ‘take their place within the life and worship of Christ’s Church’ (*Presentation of the Candidates*); the candidates are urged to ‘fight valiantly’ and ‘remain faithful to Christ’, God is asked to ‘lead’ the candidates ‘in the light and obedience of Christ’ (*Signing with the Cross*); the whole congregation together affirms their faith with the *Creed*; ‘within the company of Christ’s pilgrim people’ may you ‘daily be renewed by his anointing Spirit’ (*Baptism*).

§4 The ‘biblical framework’

The Liturgical Commission describes four elements to the ‘biblical framework’ they used in writing the service of baptism. First, sin is described in relational terms, as separation: ‘social blindness and estrangement is the root sin of which actual sins are symptoms.’ Second, redemption is therefore the restoration of those relationships, ‘the creating of a community centred on God with a new pattern of life.’ In these first two, ‘God’s action is primary.’ Third, ‘reception into the community is the beginning of a journey of growth into the pattern of Christ.’ Finally, God’s mission is accomplished as he brings the

⁷ *CW:IS*, 11.

⁸ *CW:IS*, 10.

⁹ *CW:IS*, 12.

¹⁰ *CW:IS*, 186.

members of the community ‘to full growth’ so he can establish his rule over the world.¹¹ This framework is recognised in a variety of biblical images, all of which ‘have a claim’ to be ‘reflected’ in the liturgy.¹²

Having described the framework in these terms, the Commission applies it to the ‘Church context’. The baptism service becomes ‘acted evangelism, proclaiming in Christ’s death and resurrection God’s victory over the world powers of chaos and darkness to establish the new creation.’ This victory over darkness (i.e. ‘blindness’ and ‘estrangement’) is the basis for redemption: the first and second elements of the framework. Third (‘reception’), the victory renews the covenant and places Christ at the centre of it, so that ‘baptism is the outward sign and ritual mark of incorporation into the people of the New Covenant.’ This language is deliberately the language of circumcision. Finally, reflecting the fourth element of the framework, the catechetical process is to continue after the service, encouraging ongoing discipleship, ‘opening hearts and minds to the pattern centred on Christ crucified.’¹³

The service reflects the language of this *application* of the framework more than it does the language of the framework itself. For example, sin as separation is only mentioned once (‘Do you repent of the sins that separate us from God and neighbour’ in the *Decision*), whereas the victory of light over darkness is mentioned three times: ‘In baptism, God calls us out of darkness into his marvellous light’ (*Decision*); ‘May almighty God deliver you from the powers of darkness’ (*Signing with the Cross*); ‘God has delivered us from the dominion of darkness’ (*Giving of a Lighted Candle*).

We have already in the previous section given examples of the themes of incorporation and growth; these examples apply equally to the covenant theme; this theme is perhaps clearest in the *Prayer over the Water*, the place of the ‘main theological statement about baptism’ within the service,¹⁴ but it is also referred to in the *Prayers of Intercession* (‘As a royal priesthood...’) and in the short Proper Preface of *The Eucharistic Prayer* (‘you have made us a holy people in Jesus Christ our Lord’). The basis of that covenant—the death and resurrection of Jesus—is called to mind in the *Introduction* (‘dying to sin that we may live his risen life’), the *Decision* (‘To follow Christ means dying to sin and rising to new life with him’), in the *Signing with the Cross* (‘Do not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified’), the *Prayer over the Water* (‘In [the waters of baptism] we are buried with Christ in his death; by it we share in his resurrection’) and the *Profession of Faith* (the Apostles’ Creed).

One of the criticisms levelled at the *Alternative Service Book* (*ASB*), the predecessor of *Common Worship*, was that it ‘relied too heavily on the Pauline theology of dying and rising with Christ.’¹⁵ So other baptismal images (e.g. seal, washing, anointing, inheritance) are scattered throughout the service. This ‘broadening of baptismal imagery’ also reflects the Commission’s desire to move ‘beyond the narrowly Paschal.’¹⁶

¹¹ *CW:IS*, 189.

¹² *CW:IS*, 190.

¹³ *CW:IS*, 190.

¹⁴ *CW:IS*, 197.

¹⁵ Bradshaw, *Companion*, 163.

¹⁶ *CW:IS*, 197.

III. The Sign of the Covenant

§5 The context of baptism

As we begin our account of baptism in the Bible, where do we start? The Old Testament records no practice of baptism, so we turn to the New. One by one potential starting-points show themselves to be inadequate: John the Baptist,¹⁷ Jesus' own baptism by John,¹⁸ Jesus' practice and teaching,¹⁹ the Great Commission,²⁰ and finally the book of Acts, which has a great many examples of baptism, but 'the narratives in Acts are just that—narratives—and provide no coherent explanation of the significance of baptism.'²¹ And so we turn to the epistles to begin our account of baptism.

Of the nine explicit references to baptism in the epistles, Kuhrt highlights four in particular which draw parallels with an Old Testament 'covenant episode' (1 Corinthians 10.1-4; Galatians 3.26-29; Colossians 2.11-13; 1 Peter 3.18-21): for example, the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Abrahamic covenant by faith (Galatians), and baptism being a sign of moral/spiritual circumcision (Colossians). Three of the remaining five passages have a covenant *context* (Romans 6.1-4; 1 Corinthians 12.13; Ephesians 4.3-5): the basis of the new covenant in the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans), and the unity of the church in baptism, as Gentiles are included in the covenant (1 Corinthians and Ephesians).

The eight 'probable' references to baptism in the epistles²² reinforce the covenant context of the explicit references. 1 Corinthians 6.11, Ephesians 5.25-27, Titus 3.5-7, Hebrews 10.22 talk of 'washing', as in Acts 22.16: 'Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.' 2 Corinthians 1.20-22, Ephesians 1.13-14, Ephesians 4.30 talk of 'sealing', as in Romans 4.1, linking baptism as seal with the old covenant seal of circumcision. The 'anointing' in 1 John 2.20 & 27, 2 Corinthians 1.20-22 points to the gift of the Holy Spirit, at both Jesus' own baptism and Pentecost. All three—washing (holiness, purity), seal (circumcision) and anointing (e.g. kings)—play major parts in the old covenant. We will not drown the reader in myriad references to demonstrate this point.

It seems beyond reasonable doubt that the New Testament understanding of baptism is best described against the backdrop of God's covenant with Israel. However, some advocates of credo-baptism argue that this fails to acknowledge the 'newness' of the new covenant, before and after Easter. They highlight

the distinction between the promise of earthly and temporal blessings like physical descendants and land in the Old Covenant, with its focus upon physical descent, and the promise of heavenly and spiritual blessings in the New Covenant.²³

This argument would look to a passage like Hebrews 8-11. Other passages contrast righteousness through

¹⁷ Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, 717; Isaak, 'Baptism', 4.

¹⁸ Kuhrt, *Believing in Baptism*, 12; Migliore, *Faith Seeking*, 282; Richardson, *Introduction*, 180; etc.

¹⁹ Mark 10.38; Luke 12.50. See White, *Biblical Initiation*, 115.

²⁰ Kuhrt, *Believing in Baptism*, 14.

²¹ Kuhrt, *Believing in Baptism*, 16.

²² Beasley-Murray regards all eight as referring to baptism: *Baptism*, 126-262. See also Kuhrt, *Believing in Baptism*, 23-29.

²³ Brownson, *The Promise*, 116.

faith and works, or grace and law (e.g. 2 Corinthians 3, Romans 9.30-33). Using Galatians, others highlight the discontinuity between Israel the nation by heredity, and Israel the church by faith.²⁴ Beasley-Murray contrasts death and life, condemnation and righteousness, flesh and spirit, grace and works:²⁵

The Church is one, but the difference between the two ‘administrations’ is cataclysmic, for they are separated by a gulf and an unscalable height, the death of Christ and the glory of his Easter, with the age of the Spirit ensuing.²⁶

The covenant is radically altered in Jesus Christ; so if we fail to do justice to the historical development of the covenant, if we ‘fail to recognize the diversity as well as the unity of the old and new,’ we ‘succumb to a flattened, truncated view of redemptive history.’²⁷

We answer this charge in two ways. First, Beasley-Murray’s focus on discontinuity is an exaggeration. To place a ‘gulf, an ‘unscalable height’ between old and new is to polarize their differences. Indeed, as a methodological point, it is preferable to assume unity within the one ‘redemptive history’ before we identify discontinuity, or we risk Marcionism.²⁸ Indeed, as Hull demonstrates, the discontinuities Beasley-Murray identifies between ‘old’ and ‘new’ are actually present *throughout* scripture:

the struggle between these opposing realities runs throughout the Bible. It is fundamentally misleading to locate all their negative counterparts in the Old Testament in order to draw so sharp a contrast between the two parts of one Bible.²⁹

Second, we acknowledge that there *is* a discontinuity between old and new. Hebrews tells us that Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice of himself puts an end to the sacrificial system. Before, the law had to be imposed as an ‘external restraint’ (the ‘disciplinarian’ of Galatians 3.25), but now ‘the Spirit transforms us into the image of Christ.’ The church is not political, but ‘salt’ and ‘light’ in the world, its members recognizing allegiance to secular political powers.³⁰ In the new covenant, Christ is made more explicit and many Jewish observances are made obsolete; ‘but the covenant of grace with faith is not obsolete.’³¹ So Brownson argues that the new covenant is not the replacement for an old, failed covenant,

but rather its extension and completion. ... Though Scripture speaks at times of an “Old Covenant” and a “New Covenant”, there is still in essence only one covenant that unfolds throughout Scripture.³²

Arguably then, the context of baptism is ‘the supreme covenant of God, running through from Abraham’s day to our own.’³³ So we turn to the Old Testament to help us understand that covenant of *grace* and *faith*.

²⁴ George, ‘The Reformed doctrine’, 250.

²⁵ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 334-340, especially 338.

²⁶ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 338.

²⁷ George, ‘The Reformed doctrine’, 250. See also White, *Biblical Doctrine*, 265.

²⁸ Hull, *Baptism*, 6.

²⁹ Hull, *Baptism*, 6. See also Brownson, *The Promise*, 118-119.

³⁰ Brownson, *The Promise*, 116-117.

³¹ Green, *Baptism*, 59.

³² Brownson, *The Promise*, 117.

³³ Green, *Baptism*, 59.

§6 The covenant framework

N.T. Wright summarizes the covenant thus:

God has called Abraham and his family to undo the sin of Adam, even though Abraham and his family are themselves part of the problem as well as bearers of the solution.³⁴

Through Israel, God will address and solve the problems of the world, bringing justice and salvation to the ends of the earth—though quite how this will happen remains... more than a little mysterious.³⁵

As the Bible unfolds this ‘one single covenant of grace and faith,’³⁶ some key themes emerge.³⁷

The first theme is *God’s gracious initiative*. The establishment of the covenant is emphasised as God’s work. So, in Genesis 17.2 God says to Abram, ‘I will make my covenant between me and you.’ This formula is repeated throughout the Old Testament (e.g. Psalm 132.11-18; Isaiah 55.3; Ezekiel 27.36). When God refers to the covenant, it is nearly always as ‘my covenant’ (e.g. Judges 2.1; 1 Chronicles 16.15; Ezekiel 16.8, 60, 62). If it is to be everlasting, the basis of the covenant can *only* be God’s grace.

Second is the *promise of blessing*. The covenant promises great blessing, to Israel and to the world through Israel (e.g. Genesis 12.1-3; Isaiah 2.2-3). The blessing is both physical—land and descendants (e.g. Genesis 18.18, 26.4; Exodus 33.1; Psalm 105.9-12)—and spiritual—a close relationship with God, the forgiveness of sins (e.g. Exodus 4.22, 19.4-6; Deuteronomy 14.1; 2 Samuel 7; Psalm 51; Hosea 2.16). But the covenant promises curses for those who do not obey (e.g. Deuteronomy 11.26; 2 Samuel 7.14); there is a tension between the blessings being a gift of God’s grace, while also being conditional on human obedience.

Finally is the *human response*. Faithful obedience is expected of Abraham in the middle chapters of Genesis; the law details Israel’s correct response to God’s saving grace (the Decalogue begins, ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery’ – Exodus 20.2). The law and the prophets urged the people to live a holy life, for God had set them apart as a holy nation, a kingdom of priests (e.g. Exodus 19.4-6; Jeremiah 32.40; Ezekiel 16.59-63, 37.26-28). Without this ‘spiritual response of trusting obedience,’³⁸ they risked judgement in place of blessing.

As a gift of grace requiring obedience, God gave the covenant-sign of circumcision, both a mark of God’s people and a sign of the ‘spiritual response’ they were supposed to embody. We will discuss this in §9.

Having identified the ‘one single covenant of grace and faith,’ we expect to find the same themes in the New Testament, as well as some discontinuity; Romans 3.21-26 (e.g.) shows exactly this. The importance of faith is made explicit as the only *necessary* human response. The tension between grace and obedience is resolved; Jesus’ death atoned for our universal failure to respond to God, so the covenant-blessings (e.g. justification) are now entirely gifts of God’s grace, offered through Jesus, to be received by faith.

³⁴ Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 23. See also Wright, *New Testament*, 260-268; *Evil and Justice*, 25-34 etc.

³⁵ Wright, *Paul: Fresh Perspectives*, 24.

³⁶ Green, *Baptism*, 61.

³⁷ See Kuhrt, *Believing in Baptism*, 34-44.

³⁸ Kuhrt, *Believing in Baptism*, 43.

§7 Baptism and faith

If the blessings of the new covenant are offered by grace, to be received through faith, we have to ask about the nature of *sacraments*. The question arises because many of the blessings of the new covenant are attributed not only to faith but also to baptism, e.g. forgiveness (faith: Romans 3.21-22; baptism: Acts 2.38) and salvation (faith: John 3.16; baptism: 1 Peter 3.21).³⁹ As Kuhrt writes, ‘the entire gospel, the whole covenant grace, promises and blessings of Almighty God are intimately expressed in baptism.’⁴⁰ The question is: when we are baptized, are the blessings of the covenant conferred by baptism or by our faith?

Since the Reformation there has been a strand of theology following Zwingli, who (to put it crudely) reduced baptism to an oath, to a pledge which ‘proves’ that the candidate ‘has faith’.⁴¹ Similarly, Melancthon saw sacraments as ‘confirmatory’ of ‘a prior reality, i.e. the event of faith.’⁴² Brenz and the ‘Enthusiasts’ were puzzled by the need for baptism if one is justified by faith.⁴³ This Zwinglian model is still with us, perhaps most commonly in churches which affirm a theology of credo-baptism.

Zwingli’s theology arose from a concern to ‘correct’ the perceived over-emphasis on the objectivity of the sacraments by the *ex opere operato* (‘in the doing it is done’) theology of the Roman Catholic church. In this model, baptism is a means of grace which (a) leaves an indelible mark; and (b) conveys the once-for-all grace of salvation. The latter can be lost (though the former cannot), so continuing sin needs to be dealt with through the ‘sacramental/penitential system.’⁴⁴

By tending towards them, these two models reveal the dialectic of sacramental subjectivity and objectivity. Elements of both objectivity and subjectivity are present in all such models;⁴⁵ this is a matter of *emphasis*. Zwingli’s model places the emphasis on the subjective reception of the sacrament by faith, and the Roman Catholic model emphasizes God’s objective offer of grace. Our covenant framework however tells us that both are vital: what God *offers* us objectively, we must *receive* by faith. This is affirmed by Article XXV:

Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men’s profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God’s good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him. ... And in such only as worthily receive the same, they have a wholesome effect or operation: but they that receive them unworthily, purchase to themselves damnation, as Saint Paul saith.⁴⁶

The offer/reception model of our framework and Article XXV is exemplified by Calvin, who ‘repeatedly insists that the grace objectively *offered* in baptism must be subjectively *received* by faith.’⁴⁷

³⁹ For more comprehensive lists see Beasley-Murray, ‘Authority and Justification’, 65-66; Brownson, *The Promise*, 88; Kuhrt, *Believing in Baptism*, 76-77.

⁴⁰ Kuhrt, *Believing in Baptism*, 77.

⁴¹ Spinks, ‘Luther’s timely theology’, 33-34.

⁴² Tranvik, ‘A water gracious’, 254.

⁴³ Tranvik, ‘A water gracious’, 296; Tranvik, ‘Luther on baptism’, 82-86.

⁴⁴ Evans, ‘Really exhibited’, 77-78.

⁴⁵ Migliore, *Faith Seeking*, 280-281.

⁴⁶ *BCP*, 621-622.

⁴⁷ Evans, ‘Really exhibited’, 78.

For Calvin, baptism is a ‘sign and seal of the promise of God,’ the substance of which is Christ: ‘by the power of the Holy Spirit the sacraments serve to offer and convey Christ to the believer.’⁴⁸ This means that in baptism the blessings of the new covenant are offered and conveyed through Christ to the believer. The righteous requirement of the law has been fulfilled by Christ’s obedience to the Father, and by his sacrifice of himself for us: now the benefits of Christ’s life, death and resurrection are offered to us by God, through Christ, in baptism. Although it is offered objectively, this grace is conditioned by election; i.e. the promise and grace are only of benefit if they are received by faith.⁴⁹ Thus Calvin says:

... from this sacrament, as from all others, we obtain only as much as we receive in faith.⁵⁰

[Baptism] is not sanctified to us except when the word of promise is accepted in faith.⁵¹

In an adult convert, the ‘word of promise’ is accepted immediately; baptism is the public sign of the offer and reception that has already taken place at the moment of conversion. However, if it is not received by faith immediately, the word of promise does not vanish, for it is truly and objectively offered. This of course has particular relevance for the question of paedobaptism, and is an extremely personal aspect of Calvin’s understanding of baptism; he himself was baptized as an infant, but did not receive the word of promise by faith for many years:

We therefore confess that for that time baptism benefited us not at all, inasmuch as the promise offered us in it—without which baptism is nothing—lay neglected. This promise [of covenant-blessings] was offered to us in baptism; therefore let us embrace it by faith.⁵²

And so we reach an answer to the question—raised by the biblical texts—with which we began this section. In baptism God *offers* the blessings of the covenant, which we must *receive* by faith:

In Scripture, all the blessings attributed to baptism are also attributed to faith. This is true not because baptism is an expression of our faith, but because baptism promises what faith receives.⁵³

We have twice referred to baptism as a ‘sign’. We will return to this language in §9.

§8 The life-long pattern of baptism

In §7 we argued that baptism ‘both requires and summons from us a response of faith;’⁵⁴ in the same way that grace is offered particularly in baptism, but also throughout the life of the believer, so the reception of that grace by faith occurs particularly at the moment of *conversion*, which is the beginning of the life-long process of *discipleship*. Luther makes this point with typical clarity. First, he stresses that baptism signifies

⁴⁸ Evans, ‘Really exhibited’, 79.

⁴⁹ Evans, ‘Really exhibited’, 80.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, iv.xv.15, 1315.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, iv.xv.17, 1317.

⁵² Calvin, *Institutes*, iv.xv.17, 1317.

⁵³ Brownson, *The Promise*, 91.

⁵⁴ Brownson, *The Promise*, 87.

‘full and complete justification.’⁵⁵ God drowns the old sinful person and a new justified child of grace is born.⁵⁶ There is a ‘joyous exchange’ by God of the sinner’s unrighteousness for Christ’s righteousness; this is ‘from start to finish the gracious work of God to humankind.’⁵⁷

In the same way that the covenant can only be everlasting if it is based on God’s grace (§5), Luther’s emphasis on baptism as the work of God means he can say that baptism ‘anchors’ our faith so it can thrive.⁵⁸ When we doubt, or when we fail, we can remember with Luther, ‘I am baptized.’

To reassure ourselves this way is not to rely on a magic rite, but rather to focus our trust again upon the promise sealed to us in our baptism.⁵⁹

We look back and trust in God’s gracious promise to us that he ‘will grant justification and salvation through this strange ritual which is performed in his name.’⁶⁰ This is Luther’s second point: baptism signifies the ongoing life of the believer, as she looks back to her baptism in daily repentance and forgiveness, dying to sin and rising to new life. She knows that, whatever she does, God promised her forgiveness when she was baptized. This is not another ‘work’ by which we earn our righteousness; the life-long response of faith is simply ‘to trust that the covenant is indeed unilateral.’⁶¹

When Paul preached this message his opponents claimed that he said, ‘Let us do evil so that good may come.’⁶² That is of course exactly what Paul was *not* saying, and it is not what *we* are saying. The passages from the epistles which mention baptism do not simply show us the covenant context of baptism, but its ethical consequences.⁶³ Romans 6.1-4 is an example of this: if we have ‘died to sin’, how can we still ‘live in it’? No, ‘baptism establishes a new identity for believers.’ We should therefore seek the ‘things above’: i.e. those things which are appropriate to that new identity.⁶⁴

Here we have uncovered an eschatological tension in the new covenant: until Christ returns the baptized are *simul iustus et peccator*. The ethical demands are the ‘ideal’, but God’s promise offered through baptism is forgiveness when we fail. The ethical demands do not mean the covenant is bilateral (dependent on human response), for they are made in the context of God’s unilateral faithfulness;⁶⁵ as we repent daily of our failure, and are forgiven (according to God’s unilateral promise to us), our life follows the baptismal pattern of death and resurrection.

⁵⁵ Kolb, ‘God kills to make alive’, 39.

⁵⁶ Kolb, ‘God kills to make alive’, 37; Spinks, ‘Luther’s timely theology’, 30.

⁵⁷ Spinks, ‘Luther’s timely theology’, 29. See also Tranvik, ‘A water gracious’, 251-252.

⁵⁸ Tranvik, ‘A water gracious’, 257.

⁵⁹ Brownson, *The Promise*, 90.

⁶⁰ Spinks, ‘Luther’s timely theology’, 32.

⁶¹ Spinks, ‘Luther’s timely theology’, 32.

⁶² Romans 3.8.

⁶³ Kuhrt, *Believing in Baptism*, 19 & 26.

⁶⁴ Kolb, ‘God kills to make alive’, 49.

⁶⁵ Spinks, ‘Luther’s timely theology’, 32.

§9 The sign of the covenant

We will now use the language of ‘sign’ to draw together the threads of our account of baptism. First, it helps to describe the continuity and discontinuity between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ covenants. If we accept that circumcision is the sign of the old covenant (as in Romans 4.11), and that baptism is the sign of the new, some differences are immediately clear. For example, circumcision is only performed on males, and it involves bloodshed, whereas baptism can be performed on anyone, and points back to Christ’s blood shed on the cross. Beasley-Murray (e.g.) stops here;⁶⁶ however the similarities are, we argue, stronger. Both are rites of entry, and both distinguish God’s people from everyone outside the covenant.⁶⁷ But more than this, circumcision and baptism each point to a deeper spiritual transformation.⁶⁸ ‘Circumcision of the flesh always pointed to circumcision of the heart.’⁶⁹ This inward counterpart to circumcision of the flesh was part of both the human response to God (Deuteronomy 10.16; Jeremiah 4.4), and God’s work in the lives of his people (Deuteronomy 30.6). So Kuhrt writes, using deliberately sacramental language:

It cannot be too strongly emphasized that God’s covenant of circumcision was never meant to be merely an outward sign of natural birth or racial descent. ... It was... an outward and physical sign of something inward and spiritual.⁷⁰

Second, Article XXV calls sacraments ‘effectual *signs* of grace... in such only as worthily receive the same.’⁷¹ We have repeatedly insisted that God really and objectively offers and conveys grace in baptism, through Christ. Baptism is not ineffective, nor is it a witness to or confirmation of prior faith; rather, it calls forth the response of faith. (In the same way, circumcision was intended to be matched by a response of faithful obedience.) Baptism *itself* does nothing: it is *the divinely appointed meeting-place for grace and faith*.

Third, baptism is the sign, both of the candidate’s involvement in Jesus’ death and resurrection once-for-all, and of the pattern of Christian life (‘take up your cross’). It signifies the *priority* of God’s grace (as it is not we who baptize, but God⁷²) and the *necessity* of faith in all that we do: the Christian should aim to live as if the covenant were bilateral, while trusting that it is indeed unilateral. The latter is necessary, recognizing the reality of post-baptismal sin (so the prophets said ‘circumcise your hearts’); the former guards against complacency and the dangers of ‘cheap grace’.

In these three ways then, baptism is *the sign of the covenant*.

⁶⁶ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, 340-342.

⁶⁷ Brownson, *The Promise*, 137.

⁶⁸ Romans 2.29.

⁶⁹ Brownson, *The Promise*, 138. See also George, ‘The Reformed doctrine’, 249.

⁷⁰ Kuhrt, *Believing in Baptism*, 37.

⁷¹ *BCP*, 621-622 (italics mine).

⁷² Spinks, ‘Luther’s timely theology’, 35.

IV. Assessment

§10 A weak understanding of sin

The reader may well have noted that our biblical account of baptism that we developed in Part III differs greatly from the outline of the theology of the *Common Worship* service of Holy Baptism we gave in Part II. We will now offer a critique of the latter, according to the understanding we developed in the former.

As we said in §4, the Commission's 'biblical framework' understands the 'root sin' as 'social blindness and estrangement.' Actual sins are 'symptoms' of this root sin; redemption is the individual's inclusion into a community which is 'centred on God with a new pattern of life.'⁷³ However, our covenant framework shows that sin is more serious than 'not belonging': it is a corruption, with serious consequences. Sin literally breaks the covenant, for it is the failure to respond to God's grace (e.g. Romans 1.21; Numbers 14). 'Estrangement' is therefore *not* the 'root sin' but a *consequence* of sin; as we fail to respond to God's grace, we fail to live according to the pattern of the covenant we discussed in §8. In our framework it is a nonsense to suggest that sin can be dealt with by 'inclusion' and 'living according to a pattern'; these things are actually *impossible* precisely *because of* sin. Unless our failure to respond to God's grace is dealt with *first* we cannot live our lives according to the pattern of Christ, nor can such a community even exist.

§11 A weak understanding of grace

Given the service's weak understanding of sin it is perhaps not surprising that its understanding of grace is weak also. The focus on the life-long journey and pattern of faith is, we have seen, a vital element of our own understanding of baptism (§8). However that pattern is based on a particular historical event, namely the death and resurrection of Jesus. Without that prior event of God's grace, individual and corporate life according to that pattern is not possible. That is why, in our account, the life-long pattern was characterized as a *response* to God's grace.

By emphasizing the journey and pattern of Christian life, the service concentrates on the community and the candidate, rather than the God on whose gracious acts the life of each is based. The Commission writes that the Christian life is given coherence when it conforms to the pattern of Christ; but it is not properly the *pattern* of Christ which gives that coherence, it is the *event* of his death and resurrection, *pro me, pro nobis*, of which baptism is the 'effective sign' (§9).

There is here an underlying problem. Although the 'application' of the Commission's framework uses the *Christus Victor* model of the atonement,⁷⁴ the service itself focuses on the subjective aspect of the atonement (our response, living a life according to the pattern of Christ), and ignores its objective aspect (Christ's death and resurrection, the foundational event of that life and pattern). Our covenant framework attempts to hold these equally biblical assertions together. It understands the atonement as God's gracious

⁷³ CW:IS, 189.

⁷⁴ CW:IS, 190.

work in Christ, the benefits of which are promised to all who respond in faith. As the climax of the old covenant and the basis of the new, the *event* of Christ's death and resurrection *pro me, pro nobis* is literally of central importance; yet in the service, Christ *never* dies *pro me, pro nobis*. The absence of this objective aspect of the atonement leads to the conclusion that baptism *on its own* effects the covenant-blessings, which we know from our own biblical framework is not the case.

To develop this point further, the reader may recall that the dialectic of objectivity and subjectivity in sacramental theology has led to a tendency to emphasise one or the other. The Commission's focus on the subjectivity of the atonement is matched by a focus on the objectivity of the sacrament. In the standard service of baptism this is most notable in the inclusion of an historically contentious *Prayer over the Water*. In the *Prayer* in the parallel rite for 'Emergency Baptism', the Commission makes explicit its *ex opere operato* understanding of the sacrament:

Heavenly Father,
 bless this water,
 that whoever is washed in it
 may be made one with Christ
 in the fellowship of your Church,
 and be brought through every tribulation
 to share the risen life
 that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord.

We have argued—with the Reformers—that the *ex opere operato* model downplays the necessary response of faith, and risks encouraging the idea that grace is cheap (i.e. effective without the need to respond). Our (biblical) covenant framework asserts that the ongoing response of faith is required, or the blessings promised in baptism will come to nothing; simply being washed in the water, however sanctified, is not enough.⁷⁵ The sacrament is nothing less than the promise of the blessings won by Christ for us on the cross; it is the single event in the person's life when she is united with Christ in the single event of atonement. The subjective response to baptism is therefore the same as the response to the atonement: a continuing life of faith, trusting that the promise of baptism is indeed unilateral, that the blessings of the atonement are *mine* and *ours* in Christ. We argue that the subjective and objective need to be held together in our understanding of *both* the atonement and baptism;⁷⁶ holding this dialectic guards against a weak understanding of grace.

§12 A weak understanding of church

In the previous section we saw that the Commission focuses on the *imitation of* rather than the *response to* Christ. Its model of sacramental theology also downplays the necessity of response. This is a subtle point, for the fourth element of the Commission's biblical framework is the maturing of the Christian

⁷⁵ See also the *Catechism* in *BCP*, 295.

⁷⁶ See Kolb, 'God kills to make alive'.

community.⁷⁷ Further, it does say that the ongoing catechetical process is a vital part of baptism, especially for children, where it should lead to confirmation.⁷⁸ This is focused on the ‘pattern’ of ‘Christ crucified’.⁷⁹ However this maturing and catechetical process is never characterized as a *response* to God’s grace. In this way the Commission weakens its understanding of church, which we argue should be always focused on the foundational and ongoing grace and promise of God, as the community living by faith in response to that grace, shown particularly in Jesus Christ. When it loses its focus on God’s grace, the church forgets and takes for granted its very foundation.

Although our title has not allowed us to discuss paedo-baptism, we will now make some remarks in that direction. In his study of baptism and maturity in the New Testament, Morrison argues that no-one brings maturity with them into the church: all start as babes in Christ.⁸⁰ This reflects Jesus’ teaching about children and on humility,⁸¹ and Paul’s teaching that *all* need to turn ‘from the sophistication and maturity’ of the world outside the church.⁸² It also suggests that no church should baptize on the basis of someone’s ‘mature faith’, but on the basis of God’s call, of God’s grace; this is precisely what we have argued in this essay. If this is accepted, there is no theological barrier to the baptism of infants; indeed, the burden of proof passes to those who would not baptize them. The church is the community of people who are *all* baptized as babes, whose lives have no other foundation than the grace of God, forgiving their sin, offered once-for-all at their baptism, and reflected in their ongoing life together of faith and obedience.

§13 Conclusion

While we recognize that our account of baptism—indeed our covenant framework for understanding the biblical texts—is not definitive, we argue that the themes of grace and response that have shaped it should be present in any truly biblical framework, for they are such major themes within scripture. We have argued that these themes are particularly important for discussions of the sacraments, for they enable us to hold together the biblical dialectic of sacramental objectivity and subjectivity. Although the Liturgical Commission’s framework and service contain elements with which our framework would agree, we argue that substantial improvements could be made to bring each closer to a biblical understanding of baptism. Indeed, if our account is accepted, those improvements *must* be made. To that end, perhaps the *next* Commission should have the same desire as Luther: to have a rite of baptism

which testified to the power of God against the forces of evil, and the promise of grace given in the Word, and the presence of God the Holy Trinity now in this rite, who saves and regenerates.⁸³

⁷⁷ CW:IS, 189.

⁷⁸ CW:IS, 192.

⁷⁹ CW:IS, 190.

⁸⁰ Morrison, ‘Baptism and maturity’, 399.

⁸¹ Morrison, ‘Baptism and maturity’, 390-395.

⁸² Morrison, ‘Baptism and maturity’, 395-399, quotation 398.

⁸³ Spinks, ‘Luther’s timely theology’, 40.

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