ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO BELIEVER'S BAPTISM (FROM THE ANABAPTISTS TO BARTH)

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As is customary within this study group I must begin with an apology for the vagueness of the title. When I was asked to prepare the paper it was not really possible to be more specific. Moreover, since this is the only paper included that explicitly represents those views that oppose the theology and practice of infant baptism, it was necessary to offer a paper that at least attempted to summarise the arguments of more than one writer.

I could not pretend for a moment that anything I have to say presses the frontiers of historical research nor can I claim that my treatment of any one writer is in any way comprehensive. My aim is rather to draw out the central themes of an argument as expressed by quite different writers, in different eras, and coming from vastly different backgrounds.

Predictably, I want to begin with the Continental Anabaptists (so called: since they, of course, would reject the title) and specifically with the writings of Pilgrim Marpeck[1] from whom comes probably the fullest account of the arguments common among the main streams of Anabaptist thought.

Marpeck was born to a prominent family in the city of Rattenberg though the date of his birth remains unknown. He joined the guild of mining workers in 1520 and was appointed to the office of mining magistrate in 1525, though he resigned this office in 1528 under pressure to collaborate with the authorities in the apprehension of Anabaptists in Schwaz.

We do not know how or when Marpeck came under the influence of Anabaptist teaching but soon after his arrival in Strasbourg we find that an Anabaptist meeting is being held in his house and that he is recognised among the leaders of the Anabaptists who are granted a hearing before the city council. The leaders of the Reformation remained relatively tolerant of the steady flow of Anabaptist leaders who spent some time in the area and, although some were imprisoned, no Anabaptist was ever executed in the city for his faith in the city.

1. His name has sometimes been spelt 'Marbeck' though he signed himself 'Marpeckh'; *cf. The Writings of Pilgrim Marpeck*, trans. and ed. William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, Scottdale, 1978, p. 567.

While at Strasbourg, Marpeck served the city as an engineer with responsibilities for mining, the provision of wood and the building of a water system (a most appropriate occupation for an Anabaptist leader). The toleration Marpeck enjoyed at Strasbourg may in part have been due to his technical usefulness though both Bucer and Capito write warmly of him despite their opposition to his teaching on baptism and his opposition to the oath of allegiance. Matters reached a head towards the end of 1531 and, after a series of debates with Bucer and with the city council, Marpeck was finally banished from the city early in 1532.

Little is known of Marpeck's life until we find him employed as an engineer by the city of Augsburg in 1544. Despite warnings from the Augsburg authorities to cease holding religious meetings he appears to have been left to write unhindered until his death in 1556.[2]

It is almost certain that Marpeck never received any formal theological training yet he is unquestionably one of the most important and perceptive of the early Anabaptist writers. Klaassen comments that, although Marpeck was not a trained theologian he 'nevertheless often penetrated more deeply into theological issues than university trained leaders. . . .'[3] In January 1532 Marpeck presented a confession of faith to the Strasbourg city council which he had prepared during the December of the previous year.[4] Central to the argument of this 'Confession' is the rejection of the opinion that infants ought to be baptised 'on the basis of the figure or analogy of circumcision'.[5] His point is not that there are two distinct covenants of which circumcision and baptism are the respective signs since there is ultimately but one covenant which is fulfilled in Christ. Rather circumcision must be understood not as the covenant itself but as a symbol (*Zeichen*) given to Abraham and indicative of a promise and a hope that were yet future. Water baptism, on the other hand, is the external witness (*Zeugnis*) of this one covenant which is now fulfilled.[6] Circumcision was given as the sign of God's promise and of the demands of the law which, prior to the Spirit of Christ, man had no possibility of fulfilling. Water baptism is the external witness to an inner baptism of the Spirit of Christ which 'springs from faith', 'demands nothing but love', and 'adds power and action to the desire'.[7] The children of the 'old covenant' were therefore children of promise. The new 'birth' which is the result of inner baptism was not mentioned in the Old Testament since it has only now become a possibility in Christ.[8] Similarly the sin which occurred during this Old Testament period 'under the patience of God' is only now forgiven since

2. This outline of Marpeck's life is based upon the account in Klassen and Klaassen's 'Introduction', *Writings*, pp. 15-41.
3. *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen, Scottdale, 1981, p. 119.
4. 'Confession of 1532' in *Writings*, pp. 107-157.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 117f., *cf.* p. 107.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 109f.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

it has now been 'carried' by Christ.[9] Circumcision was a symbol of that which was not yet, but water baptism is a witness of what already is, a witness 'to the inner conviction that one's sins are forgiven'.[10] this is the reason that Paul, in Colossians 2:11f, compares baptism, not with outer circumcision but with the circumcision of the heart which 'proceeds from faith in Christ' and which 'infant baptism cannot accomplish'.[11]

Referring to John 3:3 Marpeck argues that the birth of the Spirit must precede water since the earthly elements such as water are themselves witnesses to the Spirit of God. For the water to precede the Spirit is to treat the Spirit as a secondary witness.[12] It therefore must be illegitimate to administer the earthly witness of water baptism prior to the inner baptism of the Spirit.[13] Earlier Marpeck had made a similar point in a booklet in which he challenged the 'quietism' of Caspar Schwenckfeld though here his primary concern was to urge the appropriateness and importance of water baptism.[14] He speaks of water baptism as a 'prescribed witness' and rejects the extreme that regards all outward ceremonies as unnecessary.[15] But here again he sees water baptism as the outward witness of an inner baptism:

> If one is previously baptised by Christ, by the kindled fire of the Holy Spirit in fire and spirit, then one may also make a testimony concerning the forgiveness of sins by the sprinkling of the baptismal water, which follows the belief in the outward preached Word.[16]

In his 'Confession' Marpeck also responds to those who argue that they are 'free to baptise before or after the presence of faith' since they are not 'bound by time or age'. While this may be true for God himself it is certainly not true for 'people and creatures' who still have 'beginning, middle, end, order, and time'. If the infant were not bound by time or age it would be free to respond to the Word of God. Since this does not occur we must not anticipate it but must proceed in a proper order and time, witnessing in baptism to the inner working of God.[17]

Not only can no-one confess faith on behalf of another,[18] no-one is free to consign another to death without their consent. This is the inner

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9. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 153; *cf.* p. 107.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 143: In a letter to the Swiss Brethren Marpeck speaks of an 'ignorant baptism' without 'true, revealed, personal faith whether in children or adults' (Judgement and Decision' in *Writings*, pp. 309-361, p. 333).
14. 'A Clear and Useful Instruction' in *Writings*, pp. 69-106.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 83f. Similarly in a tract refuting Hans Bunderlin, Marpeck affirms the importance of external baptism: 'Whoever has been inwardly baptised, with belief and the Spirit of Christ in his heart, will not despise the external baptism and the Lord's Supper which are performed according to Christian, apostolic order; nor will he dissuade anyone from participating in them'. ('A Clear Refutation' in *Writings, pp. 43-67, p. 65.*)
16. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
17. 'Confession of 1532' in *Writings*, pp. 143f.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

meaning of water baptism and it renders infant baptism 'a sacrifice to Moloch, an apish copying, a serpent sign'.[19]

To those who would argue that unbaptised children are condemned Marpeck replies in two ways. In the first place he simply affirms that they are accepted on the basis of the promise of Christ rather than on the basis of personal faith and external baptism:

> Christ has accepted the children without sacrifice, without circumcision, without faith, without knowledge, without baptism; he has accepted them solely by virtue of the word: 'To such belongs the kingdom of heaven'.[20]

In the second place (and more problematically?) he argues for the 'innocence' of the child since the sin of Adam consists in the 'knowledge of good and evil'. Only when a child attains such knowledge do 'sin, death, and damnation begin.' Only then does one need to become a child again through faith in Christ:

> All true simplicity of infants is bought with the blood of Christ, but without any law, external teaching, faith, baptism, Lord's Supper, and all other Christian ceremonies, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven without admonition to change. But to those who claim to know good and evil . . . the Lord says: 'You must become as children.' He is condemned who is not born again through faith and baptism for the forgiveness of sins, and who is not born again into the obedience of faith, the simplicity and innocence of the child.[21]

Since children are to be 'received' Marpeck urges that they should be 'named before a congregation'; that 'God should be duly praised' that he 'has also had mercy' on them and 'assured them of the kingdom of God'; and that prayers should be said for them:

> We admonish the parents to cleanse their conscience, as much as lies in them, with respect to the child, to do whatever is needed to raise the child up to the praise and glory of God, and to commit the child to God until it is clearly seen that God is working in him for faith or unfaith. Any other way is to be like thieves and murderers and to be ahead of Christ.[22]

'The Admonition of 1542', which is the fullest statement of the Anabaptist understanding of baptism, was attributed to Marpeck by

19. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
21. 'Judgment and Decision', p. 337; *cf.* 'Confession', p. 130ff.
22. 'Confession', p. 147.

Caspar Schwenckfeld in a letter to Helene von Freyberg dated May 27, 1543.[23] Although this 'Admonition' (*Vermanung*) was based on a previous work by Bernhard Rothmann (*Bekkenntnisse van beyden Sacramenten: 1533*) the text has been extensively amended and sufficient new material added to increase its overall length by approximately 50%. Marpeck and his colleagues clearly viewed this amended text as wholly representative of their own viewpoint and purged of its former Munsterite errors.

The booklet discusses the meaning of the term 'sacrament' which it understands as an act commanded by Christ in which both the content and the action take place in the context of a commitment to a holy covenant.[24] It then considers the practice of baptism and the Lord's Supper at great length. In terms anticipating Barth it notes that all Germany boasts of the gospel yet nowhere is the church as the holy community of God to be found. The root of the fault is the misuse of baptism:

> when this entrance has been destroyed, and almost everybody is confused about it, the holy church has also been desecrated and disrupted. It is to be assumed that the holy church will never come to its holiness unless this entrance to the church will again be rebuilt, reinstituted, and cleansed of all infamy.[25]

The 'Admonition' takes as its starting point that Christian baptism can only be considered valid if it occurs according to the command of Christ. Thus, contrary to the arguments of Zwingli,[26] Christian baptism must be distinguished from John's baptism since the words spoken by John were: 'I baptise you with the water of repentance', while the words commanded by Christ are 'baptise them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit'[27] (previously Marpeck had mistakenly distinguished John's baptism from Christian baptism on the grounds that the former was not a baptism for the remittance and forgiveness of sin).[28] Moreover, this command of Christ's suggests an ordering in which baptism is both preceded and followed by instruction.[29]

Turning to I Peter 3:21 the 'Admonition' further notes that true baptism must include within it a 'certain assurance of a good conscience with God, a removal of the old being, a shedding of sin and the lust of the flesh, and the intention henceforth to live in obedience to the will of

23. 'The Admonition of 1542' in *Writings*, pp. 159-302; *cf.* p. 571.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 169ff.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 201; *cf.* pp. 259f.
26. Ulrich Zwingli, 'Refutation of the Tricks of the Baptists' (*In catabaptistarum strophas elenchus:* 1527) in *Selected Works*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson (Univ. of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1972), pp. 123-258.
27. 'Admonition', pp. 172-177.
28. '. . . Instruction', p. 88; *cf.* Luke 3:3 and Acts 2, 38.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 182ff.

God'. Only in this conscious union of the believer with God can baptism be said to 'save'. According to Paul it is the power of faith rather than the act of baptism which accomplishes new birth:[30]

> Baptism is an immersion or *sprinkling with water* desired by the one who is being baptised. Baptism is received and accepted as a sign and *co-witness* that he has died to his sins and has been buried with Christ; henceforth, he may arise into a new life, to walk, not according to the lusts of the flesh, but obediently, according to will of God. Those who are thus minded, and confess this intent, should be baptised. When that is done, they are correctly baptised. Then in their baptism, they will certainly attain forgiveness of sins and thereby, having put on Jesus Christ, they will be accepted into the communion of Christ. The one who is thus baptised experiences this communion, not through the power of baptism, nor through the word that is spoken there, and certainly not through the faith of the Godfathers, the sponsors; as his fleshly lusts depart and he puts on Christ, he experiences it through his own knowledge of Christ, through his own faith, through his voluntary choice and good intentions, through the Holy Spirit.'[31]

Baptism is therefore misused whenever unwilling or innocent people are brought to it or when someone of 'a false impure heart' desires to be baptised.[32] Whenever a sponsor makes promises on behalf of a child he puts himself in God's place by promising that which God alone can give.[33]

Once again we find the argument that children ought not to be baptised since they are 'innocent': 'they have not yet been perverted by their own fleshly mind and thus, do not know the difference between good and evil . . . original sin is inherited only when there is a knowledge of good and evil'.[34] Therefore 'God is merciful toward the infants because of their ignorance and genuine innocence; to others, he is merciful because of their faith and repentance'.[35]

As before a lengthy section of the 'Admonition' is given to a 'rebuttal' of the argument that water baptism has simply replaced circumcision.[36] Again it is affirmed that there is indeed only one true covenant of the 'promise and command of God' which includes both Abraham and all true believers. But this is no ground to equate circumcision and baptism.[37] The 'old' covenant was a covenant of promise; a 'prediction . . . pointing

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 185ff.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 197f.: the words in italics are those considered by the editors of the text to be additions to the original 'Confession' by the 'Marpeck group'.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 202f.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 214.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 204ff.; *cf.* pp. 245ff.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
36. *Ibid.*, pp. 221ff.
37. *Ibid.*, pp. 222ff.

forward to a new beginning in Christ Jesus'. The 'true circumcision of the heart', the 'renewal of regeneration' which believers now experience was not received under this promise of the covenant.[38] The true church of Christ was prefigured in the 'old church' of Abraham's physical seed, sealed with physical circumcision, and receiving a physical promised land – all indicative of the promise of God yet to be fulfilled.[39] This 'ancient church' had no authority to forgive sins nor had it received the Holy Spirit.[40] Yet this which was a matter of hope and promise in the past is a present reality for those who have now received pardon and forgiveness of sin, who 'unlike the ancients . . . never lack the glory of God.'[41] Here again Marpeck notes that it is not external circumcision but the inner circumcision of the heart that is related to baptism. The true children of Abraham are children of promise rather than those born 'according to the flesh'.[42]

Marpeck also rejects the view that the baptism of infants can be based upon an 'inner, hidden, unrevealed, and future faith'. If this should be true of the external witness of baptism why is it not equally true of the external witness of communion? If the biblical requirement of belief can be set aside in the case of baptism why cannot also the biblical requirement that a man should 'examine himself' be set aside in communion?[43]

The 'Admonition' disputes the assertion that infant baptism had been continuously practised since the apostles but notes in any case that many false teachings and practices were introduced at an early date. Similarly it rejects the inference that 'household' baptism would have included infants.[44] Although God *could* give faith to the child there is no basis for saying that he *does* so; rather his power is 'placed in the order of His Word and will'.[45]

The key themes of Marpeck's understanding of baptism are common to most of the major Anabaptist writers. The distinction between the external baptism of water and the inner baptism of the Spirit of which the former is a witness had previously been stated by Balthasar Hubmaier who also distinguished three forms of baptism: '. . . that of the Spirit given internally in faith; that of water given externally through the oral confession of faith before the church; and that of blood in martyrdom or on the deathbed'.[46] This threefold distinction is repeated by Hans Hut.[47]

38. *Ibid.*, pp. 224f.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 231f. Marpeck refuses to limit the reference in John 7:39 to the 'gifts' of the Spirit and to 'apostolic office': 'It is clear from the writings of the apostles and of the New Testament that the Spirit was not there . . . (*sic!*).
41. *Ibid.*, p. 237.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 238f.
43. *Ibid.*, pp. 247ff.
44. *Ibid.*, pp. 253ff.
45. *Ibid.*, pp. 255f.
46. Balthasar Hubmaier, 'A Short Justification' (1526), quoted in *Anabaptism in Outline*, pp. 166f.; cf. 'A Christian Instruction' (1526-1527), quoted in *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 167.
47. Hans Hut (1527), quoted in *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 169.

In his letter to Thomas Muntzer, Conrad Grebel also relates the 'age of discernment' in children to a 'knowledge of good and evil' and speaks of them as 'surely saved by the suffering of Christ, the new Adam', without either faith or baptism.[48]

Dietrich Philips similarly relates the 'age of discretion' to the ability to 'distinguish good from evil' and speaks of children being received through the promise of Christ without either faith or baptism. In fact, he takes a further step by speaking of the death of Christ as the payment for original sin 'to the degree the children may not be judged and condemned on account of Adam's transgression'. While children have a 'tendency' toward evil this 'does not damn them', by the 'grace of God' it is 'not accounted as sin to them'.[49]

In the second place, and more briefly, I want to turn to the English baptist, John Bunyan. It is highly unlikely that any of the material we have so far considered was either known or even available to Bunyan, though he had certainly heard of the Munster debacle and refers to Jan van Leyden.[50]

Of course, it is even disputed as to whether Bunyan was, in fact, a baptist.[51] Both baptists and congregationalists claim him as their own. During Bunyan's life the Bedford congregation remained 'open' both in communion and membership: believers were received on the basis of authentic repentance and a knowledge of salvation (even today the 'Bedford Meeting' remains in membership both with the United Reformed Church and with the Baptist Union). There appears to be no record authenticating the tradition of Bunyan's baptism by Gifford in the River Ouse and baptism is only mentioned twice in the *Church Book* of the Bedford Meeting during the years 1650-1690.[52] His second daughter, Elizabeth, was 'baptised' as an infant in 1654 (though it is possible that his wife, who remained an Anglican, may have insisted on this). In 1672 a 'Joseph Bunyan', 'son of John Bunyan' was 'baptised in the Parish Church of St Cuthbert in Bedford (though it is disputed as to whether this was a son or a grandson of *the* John Bunyan).[53] Certainly Bunyan was 'Calvinistic' in theology. His understanding appears to be that which we refer to as 'federal Calvinism'. He was certainly no 'general baptist'. Perhaps the best way of describing his position is as an 'open and

48. Conrad Grebel and Friends, 'Letters to Thomas Muntzer', in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, ed. George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal, Philadelphia, 1957, pp. 73-85 (p. 81).
49. Dietrich Philips, 'Christian Baptism' (1564), quoted in *Anabaptism in Outline*, p. 187; cf. p. 185, and 'Regeneration and the New Creature' (1556) quoted in *Anabaptism in Outline*, pp. 63ff.
50. John Bunyan, 'Differences in Judgment about Water Baptism, no Bar to Communion' in *The Whole Works of John Bunyan*, ed. George Offor, London, 1862, pp. 616-642 (p. 622).
51. *Cf.* Joseph D. Ban, 'Was John Bunyan a Baptist? A case-study in historiography' in *The Baptist Quarterly, vol. XXX* (1910-11), pp. 367-376.
52. For these details of Bunyan I am grateful to Revd Robert Archer whose extensive research is, as yet, unpublished.
53. *Cf.* W. T. Whitley, 'The Bunyan Christening 1672' in *Transactions of the Baptist Historical Society, vol. II* (1910-11), pp. 255-263.

particular baptist' as distinct from a 'strict and particular baptist'.[54] The implications of this 'openness' will be the focal point of our attention.

In 1672 Bunyan wrote a tract entitled *A Confession of my faith*[55] in which he referred to baptism and communion as not to be counted among the 'fundamentals of our Christianity'. This tract brought a critical response from William Kiffin who, as a 'strict and particular baptist', believed that valid water baptism was a necessary condition for the receiving of believers both at the Lord's Supper and into membership of the church. Bunyan replied to Kiffin's criticisms in 1673 with a further tract entitled *Differences in Judgment about Water Baptism, no Bar to Communion.*

Bunyan begins by making it plain that he does not deny the ordinance of baptism itself.[56] What he denies is that 'differences in judgment' concerning it should be a bar either to communion or to membership of the church. He maintains that Kiffin and others have turned water baptism into a 'wall of division' to 'separate the righteous from the unrighteous'. A believer should be received simply on the basis of faith and holiness:[57]

> I do not plead for a despising of baptism, but a bearing with our brother, that cannot do it for want of light. The best of baptism he hath, viz the signification thereof: he wanteth only the outward shew, which if he had, would not prove him truly a saint; it would not tell me he had the grace of God in his heart; it is no characteristical note to another of my Sonship with God.[58]

According to Bunyan water baptism is not an 'initiating ordinance, nor a 'sign' making the believer a 'visible saint' before the church. It is rather a confirming sign to the believer himself. A man can certainly be a 'visible saint' without yet having received 'light' concerning the matter of water baptism.[59]

Both here and in his previous 'Confession' Bunyan argues that the baptism spoken of in Ephesians 4:5 is a baptism *by* the Spirit (which he distinguishes from a baptism *with* the spirit). It is this baptism which joins us to the church.[60] That which really matters is that which baptism signifies. The true believer may not yet have received light concerning water baptism but he already has the 'doctrine' of baptism by virtue of his

54. *Cf.* D. M. Lloyd-Jones, 'John Bunyan: Church Union' in *Light from John Bunyan and other Puritans* , London, 1978), pp. 86-102 (p. 92).
55. John Bunyan, 'A Confession of my faith, in *Works.*
56. 'Differences . . .', p. 617.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 618f.
58. *Ibid.*, p. 627.
59. *Ibid.*, pp. 619ff.
60. *Ibid.*, pp. 623f.

faith, repentance and holiness of life.[61] That which he lacks is an 'outward ceremony the substance of which he hath already'.[62]

Bunyan's use of Scripture is less than convincing (at one point he even questions whether every saint in the primitive church would have been baptised with water).[63] Yet his motive in seeking to maintain unity among believers who differed in judgment has commended itself to subsequent generations. By far the majority of Baptist churches are 'open' in membership and communion (would that they were also, like Bunyan, 'particular' in theology). Martyn Lloyd-Jones speaks warmly of Bunyan's openness in a paper read at the 1978 Westminster Conference, and concludes:

> what we must never do, surely, is to divide and separate and to make that which John Bunyan regarded as secondary, central and all important and a cause for breaking or refusing communion.[64]

But the question here is whether water baptism ought to be regarded as a secondary issue. It is one thing to seek unity with all those who are truly joined to Christ by faith. It is quite another thing to imply that differences of opinion over the issue of water baptism are secondary and of little consequence. While Bunyan's desire for unity is commendable that which separates him from Marpeck is the latter's recognition of the consequences of maintaining the practice of infant baptism. At issue is not merely an outward ceremony but all that it implies concerning the reality of spiritual rebirth and the composition of the church. In his controversial sermon on the theme of baptismal regeneration C. H. Spurgeon exposes the implications of this different opinion concerning water baptism:

> We meet with persons who, when we tell them that they must be born again, assure us that they were born again when they were baptised.... How can any man stand up in his pulpit and say 'Ye must be born again' to his congregation, when he has already assured them, by his own 'unfeigned assent and consent' to it, that they are themselves, every one of them, born again in baptism. What is he to do with them? Why, dear friends, the gospel then has no voice; they have rammed this ceremony down its throat and it cannot speak to rebuke sin. The man who has been baptised or sprinkled says: 'I am saved, I am a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven. Who are you, that you should rebuke me? Call

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 624f.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 627.
63. *Ibid.*, p. 623.
64. 'John Bunyan: Church Union', p. 102.

> me to repentance? Call me to a new life? What better life can I have? For I am a member of Christ – a part of Christ's body. . . .[65]

Probably Karl Barth remains the best-known twentieth century questioner of infant baptism. Even in the first volume of his *Dogmatics* in response to comments by Karl Heim he speaks of the 'certainty of faith' being grounded not on 'grace confirmed by baptism' but on nothing other than the 'certainty of faith itself'.[66] In 1943 Barth spoke to a gathering of theological students in Swatt on the theme of baptism and in 1947 an edited version of this lecture was published in the series *Theologische Studien,* with the title *Die Kirkliche Lehre von der Taufe.*[67] As in the *Dogmatics* Barth's opening statement summarises his viewpoint:

> Christian baptism is in essence the representation *(Abbild)* of a man's renewal through his participation by means of the power of the Holy Spirit in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and therewith the representation of man's association with Christ, with the covenant of grace which is concluded and realised in him, and with the fellowship of his church.[68]

Baptism portrays the truth of Romans 6:1f; the truth of the Christian's participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; the truth that these events of a 'particular time and place' are also events that are the truth concerning the Christian's existence.[69] Since it is the Holy Spirit who effects this union with Christ that which occurs in baptism is really 'baptism with the Holy Spirit'. Water baptism is the witness to this 'baptism of the Spirit'.[70]

Baptism is a 'sign, symbol, type *(Entsprechung)* and representation' *(Darstellung)*'.[71] It is part of the church's activity of proclamation and is therefore 'plainly a human act'.[72] It has no independent power of its own but its power depends upon Christ himself.[73] Barth refers to Acts 19:1ff. as a warning 'against any view which would ascribe to the baptismal water . . . relatively independent power of action'.[74] This power of Jesus Christ, which is the power of baptism, is not itself dependent upon baptism:[75] '. . . we must not think of the operations of the covenant of grace as being in any sense dependent on the sign which seals it.'[76]

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65. C. H. Spurgeon, 'Baptismal Regeneration: A Sermon, in *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (1864), pp. 313-328 (p. 321).
66. Karl Barth, *C. D. I 2,* pp. 205f.
67. Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism,* trans. Ernest A. Payne, London, 1948.
68. . . . *Baptism,* p. 9.
69. *Ibid.,* p. 11.
70. *Ibid.,* pp. 12f.
71. *Ibid.,* p. 14.
72. *Ibid.,* p. 16.
73. *Ibid.,* p. 19.
74. *Ibid.,* p. 21.
75. *Ibid.,* p. 23.
76. *Ibid.,* p. 25.

Moreover, the power of Christ in baptism is not 'causative or generative' but is 'cognitive' in its aim.[77]

Barth makes a number of comments on the nature of the church in which baptism ought properly to take place but his comments concerning the person baptised are our primary concern. Barth notes that in the 'sphere of the New Testament one is not brought to baptism; one comes to baptism'.[78] The person being baptised cannot be a 'merely passive instrument' but is an 'active partner' and plainly no infant 'can be such a person'.[79]

Barth briefly rehearses the usual arguments in favour of infant baptism: the interpretation of I Corinthians 7:14; the meaning of 'you and your children' in Acts 2:39; and the meaning of I Corinthians 15:29. The only 'thread of proof he knows within the New Testament for infant baptism are the references to the baptism of 'households' but, given the invariable 'sequence' of word, faith, baptism in these passages, he 'wonders whether one really wants to hold to this thread'.[80]

Of particular interest are Barth's comments on Colossians 2:11f. where baptism is called 'the circumcision of Christ'. But merely from this comparison it cannot follow that 'baptism like circumcision is to be carried out on a babe'. Circumcision was the sign of Israel's election which achieved its goal with the birth of Christ. Thus circumcision as a sign has now lost its meaning. To be a part of the church cannot be dependent upon racial, family or national succession; it is faith in the name of Jesus that gives power to become a child of God.[81]

Barth also considers the 'doctrinal' arguments for infant baptism and particularly the argument concerning the 'free antecedent grace of God'. Yet Barth supposes that the real and underlying reason for the retention of infant baptism is a reluctance to renounce the concept of the national church (*Volkskirche*):

> does not the unmistakeable disorder of our baptismal practice show at once just this: that there is a disorder in the sociological structure of our church, which perhaps must still be endured for a long time, but which can in no case be cited as a serious argument against the better ordering of our baptismal practice?'[82]

However, despite his recognition of the weakness of the case for infant baptism, Barth continues to affirm its validity:

77. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
78. *Ibid.*, p. 42.
79. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
80. *Ibid.*, pp. 43ff.
81. *Ibid.*, pp. 43f.
82. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

> 'Baptism without the willingness and readiness of the baptised is true, effectual and effective baptism, but it is not correct; it is not done in obedience, it is not administered according to proper order, and therefore it is necessarily clouded baptism.'[83]

Indeed, for Barth the best thing that can be said of the practice of infant baptism is precisely that it makes it visible that 'both Hitler and Stalin, both Mussolini and the Pope stand under the sign'. The hope that the Christian has, and which is signified by baptism, he cannot deny for even the 'most desperate cases among these others'.[84] Baptism is an 'eschatological sign' of the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection. Of itself it 'avails a man nothing', its meaning must be 'apprehended' by faith, but it remains a sign of the promise that Christ died and rose again for this man also.[85]

Paul Jewett comments that 'one cannot say a real "no" to infant baptism and at the same time affirm that it is objectively and essentially valid'; just 'as King Agrippa was almost persuaded to be a Christian, Barth is almost persuaded to be a Baptist'.[86]

But it is precisely in this hesitation that we encounter the enigma that pervades Barth's entire understanding of salvation. All men are ontologically defined as elect in Christ. On this basis we must 'hope' for all men. But are all men ontologically elect?[87] Does Barth yet grant full integrity to the inner work of grace producing faith in the life of the particular individual? If Barth's theology were not characterised by such reticence at this point would he not have pressed further in his questioning of infant baptism? At one point Barth asserts that our baptism 'is no more the cause of our redemption than is our faith'.[88] Objectively this may be true but one is left asking whether Barth's understanding of election, at this stage of his thinking, takes full account of the actuality of the work of the Spirit and the gift of faith in the life of the individual.

Cullman found Barth's treatment of the relationship between circumcision and baptism wholly unsatisfactory,[89] but it was a theme to which Barth returned with the completion of III 2 of the *Dogmatics* in early 1948. The new 'birth' of the Christian life 'signifies a direct relationship of the individual Christian to Jesus'; it is not based upon a birth by 'blood' or 'the will of the flesh'; it is not created by 'parents, family or nationality'. John 1:11f. and Colossians 2:11-12 preclude the possibility of equating baptism with circumcision but draw 'a radical

83. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
84. *Ibid.*, pp. 60f.
85. *Ibid.*, pp. 62ff.
86. Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace: an appraisal of the argument that as infants were once circumcised, so they should now be baptised*, Grand Rapids, 1978, p. 211.
87. *Cf. C. D. III 2*, pp. 585ff.
88. . . . *Baptism*, p. 27.
89. Oscar Cullman, *Die Tauflehre des Neuen Testaments*, Zwingli-Verlag, Zurich, 1948, p. 51.

distinction between them'.[90] Again in IV 3, while speaking of the 'event of vocation', Barth writes:

> It is the perverted ecclesiastical practice of administering baptism in which the baptised supposedly becomes a Christian unwittingly and unwillingly that has obscured the consciousness of the once-for-allness of this beginning, replacing it by the comfortable notion that there is not needed any such beginning of Christian existence, but rather that we can become and be Christians in our sleep, as though we had no longer to awaken out of sleep.[91]

In VI 1 Barth returns to the issue of the relationship between the church and the state implicit in the practice of infant baptism by posing the question 'who are the true Christians?' He speaks of the 'absurd result' of infant baptism by which 'whole countries have automatically been made ... the holy community'; by which the 'spiritual mystery' of the community of the church has been 'replaced and crowded out by an arrogantly invented sacramental mystery'.[92]

Barth's final and most thorough comments on baptism are the theme of the 'fragment' of his final part of *The Doctrine of Reconciliation.* In the 'Preface' to this 'Fragment' he admits that, since the publication of his earlier lecture on baptism, he had 'come to rather a different view of the matter'.[93] He refers to a book by his eldest son, Markus Barth, the exegetical conclusions of which had forced him 'to abandon the "sacramental" understanding of baptism' which he 'still maintained fundamentally in 1943'.[94]

Barth's concern in challenging the practice of infant baptism so totally is a concern for the church, that the church should become again an 'essentially missionary and mature' church. But how can this be 'so long as it obstinately, against all better judgment and conscience, continues to dispense the water of baptism with the same undiscriminating generosity as it has now done for centuries?'[95]

In distinction to the earlier lecture on baptism Barth's final approach to the subject radically divides baptism with the Holy Spirit (which Barth understands as the 'awakening, quickening and illuminating power' which initiates the new beginning of the Christian life) from baptism with water (which he now recognises as the human response of obedience and faithfulness to God as a prayer for God's continuing grace).[96] Baptism with the Holy Spirit is not identical with baptism with water.[97]

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90. *C. D. III 2*, pp. 585ff.
91. *IV 3*, pp. 517f.
92. *C. D. IV 1*, pp. 695f.; cf. *IV 3*, pp. 872ff.
93. *IV 4*, p. ix.
94. *Ibid.*, p. x; cf. Markus Barth, *Die Taufe ein Sakrament?* 1951.
95. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
96. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
97. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Christian life can only be possible and actual in union with Christ himself who is its origin. For this union to take place requires an 'inner change' whereby a man 'becomes a different man'. This change actually occurs both because something happened *extra nos* and because something happens *in nobis*. If that which happened *extra nos* was all that happened, albeit that it also happened *pro nobis*, then all athropology and soteriology would be 'swallowed up' in Christology and Barth would indeed be guilty of the 'Christomonism' with which he has so often been charged. Similarly if that which happened *in nobis* was all that happened then all would be subjectivism and anthropology. But what occurs does so both *extra nos* and *in nobis*. The once-for-all events of Crucifixion and Resurrection are not merely past or transient history but history that is present to all times and which is 'cosmically effective and significant':[98]

> In the work of the Holy Spirit the history manifested to all men in the resurrection of Jesus Christ is manifest and present to a specific man as his own salvation history.[99]

> Baptism with the Spirit is effective, causative, even creative action on man and in man. It is, indeed, divinely effective, divinely causative, divinely creative. Here, if anywhere, one might speak of a sacramental happening in the current sense of the term.[100]

This emphasis upon the *in nobis* in correspondence to the *extra nos* is taken up and developed by Eberhard Jungel not only in his essay on Barth's doctrine of baptism but as a key theme of his own theological thought.[101] It certainly is not the case that this emphasis is totally lacking in the early volumes of the *Dogmatics*. It is rather that here Barth is less reticent than usual concerning the reality of the work of the Spirit, in relation to the work of Christ, creating faith in the life of the individual. It is therefore no coincidence that the moment of Barth's least reticence concerning this inner work is also the moment of his deepest unease with the practice of infant baptism.

It is the reality of this baptism with the Holy Spirit that makes possible and demands baptism with water. Similarly baptism with water 'is what it is only in relation to baptism with the Holy Spirit'. The one is the action of God. The other is the action of man in response to the action of God. As such water baptism is the beginning of Christian ethics.[102] Water baptism is a human decision. The 'Yes' of the individual

98. *Ibid.*, pp. 17ff.
99. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
100. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
101. Eberhard Jungel, 'Karl Barths Lehre von der Taufe', in *Theologische Studien* (1968), pp. 3-55 (p. 18; *cf.* p. 38).
102. *IV 4*, p. 41; cf. Jungel, p. 44.

to the grace of God. A first step of free obedience to God's grace.[103] Its basis is the command of Christ which relates to the institution of baptism already effected by his own baptism in the Jordan by John.[104] The goal of baptism is eschatological. It is a promise pointing towards Jesus Christ himself as the future fulfilment of the kingdom of God, the judgment of God, and the grace of God.[105]

Within the context of this passage on the goal of baptism Barth discusses the relation between John's baptism and Christian baptism in a manner that falls somewhere between the views of Marpeck and Zwingli. Put briefly John's baptism shares the same goal as Christian baptism but differs from it inasmuch as the final fulfilment of that goal is already anticipated in the history of Christ.

In a much longer section Barth turns to the meaning of water baptism and, after considering various New Testament passages at some length, concludes that, while some of the passages could be interpreted sacramentally, none of them demands such an interpretation.[106] The meaning of baptism is therefore to be 'sought in its character as a true and genuine human action which responds to the divine act and word'.[107]

Barth's remaining discussion of the meaning of baptism focuses on the freedom of the act both on the part of the Christian community and the individual baptised. Water baptism is a confirmation of human conversion to God, an act of hope, a prayer, an act of free obedience in response to God's grace.[108] Given that baptism is a response of obedience to a command of God Barth finds it difficult to conceive of anyone being called a Christian, in the fullest sense, without being baptised. There may be highly abnormal situations where this occurs but from such situations one ought not to deduce a general principle.[109]

At this point Barth turns to the question of infant baptism:

> theology today is confronted by the brute fact of a baptismal practice which has become the rule in churches in all countries and in almost all confessions, and in which that which ought to be regarded as self-evident is not only no longer self-evident but has been forgotten and even intentionally ignored.[110]

In Barth's opinion one can find no genuine *doctrine* of infant baptism until the time of the Reformation and then the 'apologetic and polemical character' of the arguments used in defence of the practice reveal that such

103. *Ibid.*, pp. 42ff.
104. *Ibid.*, pp. 50ff.
105. *Ibid.*, pp. 68ff.
106. *Ibid.*, pp. 100ff.
107. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
108. *Ibid.*, pp. 130ff.; *cf.* pp. 195ff.
109. *Ibid.*, pp. 155ff.
110. *Ibid.*, p. 165.

arguments 'are later explanations, reasons and vindications'.[111] Again Barth ponders the possibility that the motivation for maintaining the practice of infant baptism at the time of the Reformation was the motivation for maintaining the concept of a state church but he concedes that this is merely 'historical conjecture'.[112]

In Barth's view the Reformers failed to demonstrate the necessity of infant baptism; failed to 'present and support' the matter calmly; failed to keep to the premises with which they began their arguments; and failed to prove what needed to be proved (too often what they actually proved was not the rightness of infant baptism but something else; e.g. that God's grace embraces children also).[113]

Turning to the arguments presented in defence of infant baptism Barth notes that, while there is no 'express prohibition' of infant baptism within the New Testament neither is it anywhere 'permitted or commanded'. That children respond to Christ in childlike ways does not constitute the beginning of Christian life. Even for children of Christian parents there can be no 'cheap grace':

> The Christian life cannot be inherited as blood, gifts, characteristics and inclinations are inherited. No Christian environment, however genuine or sincere, can transfer this life to those who are in this environment.'[114]

Neither is Barth impressed by arguments in respect of 'vicarious faith' or the reality of the faith of an infant. That such views cry out for the supplement of 'confirmation' is their greatest criticism:

> the personal faith of the candidate is indispensable to baptism. He is not asked whether his faith is perfect. But he is asked concerning his faith, however feeble.[115]

The strongest argument in favour of infant baptism, in Barth's view, is that it represents a 'remarkably vivid . . . depiction of the free and omnipotent grace of God', a depiction 'even more dramatic the more boisterously many of the infant candidates behave at the ceremony'.[116] But excellent though such a depiction may be it is not the proper meaning and reference of baptism.

Barth concludes his discussion of infant baptism with an appeal both to theologians and to Christian congregations and their pastors to

111. *Ibid.*, p. 167.
112. *Ibid.*, p. 168.
113. *Ibid.*, pp. 169ff.
114. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
115. *Ibid.*, p. 186.
116. *Ibid.*, p. 189.

abandon this 'profoundly irregular' practice.[117] But, although he speaks approvingly of the baptismal practice of Baptists and Mennonites,[118] he never retracts his rejection of 'rebaptism' in the 1943 lecture, nor does he deny the validity of infant baptism despite the fact that it cannot fulfil to any degree the meaning of water baptism as he understands it.There are few references to Anabaptist writers in Barth's *Dogmatics* and those that there are suggest that Barth had never actually read any of their writings. Indeed, his knowledge of them appears to be limited to his knowledge of Zwingli's rejection of their supposed teachings.[119] Yet Barth's conclusions are not at all dissimilar to those of Marpeck particularly in the recognition by both writers of the disastrous consequences of the practice of infant baptism for a proper understanding of the nature of the Christian and the nature of the church. Certainly for Barth and Marpeck, in distinction to Bunyan, the issue of baptism is no secondary concern.

However, the ultimate issue at stake, which is faced by Marpeck but evaded by Barth,[120] is the question of whether infant baptism can be counted as valid baptism and, in consequence, whether 're-baptism' is indeed 're-baptism'. The usual 'ecumenical compromise' suggested is, in effect, no compromise at all since it requires those who reject the validity of infant baptism to suppress their conscience in the matter by refraining from 're-baptising' those who were previously 'baptised' as infants. Bunyan's 'openness', for all its belittling of the importance of baptism, at least has the merit of being a genuine 'compromise' in which each individual believer is granted the freedom to follow his own conscience until such time as the church as a whole reforms its practice.

117. *Ibid.*, p. 194.
118. *Ibid.*, p. 193; *cf.* p. 189.
119. *Ibid.*, p. 128; *cf.* 1 2, p. 668 and *IV 1*, pp. 56f.
120. *Cf.* also Moltmann's 'suggestions for a new baptismal practice': Jurgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl, London, 1977, pp. 240ff.