

**Senior Thesis Seminar  
REL-399**

**Baptism: A Way to Bring Denominations in Closer  
Conversation with One Another?  
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## Introduction

Baptism is one of the most important activities of the Christian Church. Most Christians view baptism as one of the central actions that one needs to begin one's life as a Christian. Baptism was first seen in the Old Testament, and the earliest Christian churches developed baptism into a preliminary act in the process of becoming a Christian and entering into a Christian church. Jesus himself was baptized by John the Baptist. Baptism can be viewed as a central act of all Christians, something that every Christian has in common with one another.

However, Baptism is often a point of dissention among the Christian churches. The view of what baptism means and how it is to be performed often gets in the way of a common understanding of something so central to the faith of all Christians. Though every Christian has a similar understanding of baptism, how similar these views are to one another is easy to question. Many churches find it hard to accept other views of baptism that may be missing any central ideas or practices from their own view. One must address if it is possible to bring denominations closer together. This thesis addresses that question with a study on baptism. One must then decide if there are essential differences between the current views of baptism, while trying to find a common thread between these views.

It is interesting to note that throughout the years there has always been a debate about the proper way of practicing baptism. Even in the earliest churches, people were not sure of the "right way." There was no commandment, or direct teaching about baptism in the Bible, only the Baptisms of the first believers of the church. Christians,

then, have been left up to their own ways of determining which practices of baptism they will incorporate into their church practices.

The importance of baptism to Christian believers is outlined in several places in the New Testament by the growing church in the years after Christ. Christ himself was baptized, though he never publicly declared anything about the importance of baptism. However, Paul in his letter to the Romans puts great emphasis on the importance of Baptism. He states, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?"<sup>1</sup> Paul thus says that the importance of baptism lies with Christ's resurrection. As we are baptized, it essentially links us in to Christ. His death cleared all of us from sin, and baptism is the way that we are declared part of the Church, and the way we have all of our human sin taken from us. "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin."<sup>2</sup> Our old self is the sin that we carry as humans, yet with baptism we are connected to Christ and his redeeming action.

The same concept is made clear in Colossians as well. It is stated "when you were buried with him [Christ] in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."<sup>3</sup> Again the same ideas apply as in Romans. Because of baptism we are linked to Christ, especially Christ's death. This brings us into a relationship with God, the all powerful, who forgives our sins and sets us free from death.

We can see that although not explicitly stated by Jesus as recorded in the Gospels, the importance of baptism was awake and alive in the early Christian church. It was

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<sup>1</sup> New Revised Standard Version, Romans 6:3. All other Bible verses also from NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Romans 6:6.

<sup>3</sup> Colossians 2:12.

agreed upon that baptism links us to God, and wipes away our sins, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the common understanding of baptism that the traditions of yesterday and today grew out of. This is the starting place for all beliefs in baptism of yesterday and today.

It is important to get an understanding of how the beliefs of baptism developed through the earliest times until today. This thesis will look at the commonalities and differences between various historical views of baptism, starting with Augustine, 354–430 A.D. He will give us a good view of the Christian church during some of its formative years, much before the reformation. Augustine is important to look at in a conversation on baptism, because he wrote many statements of faith in his time, and they are a good representation of some of the early church writings at this time. Augustine was clear on his ideas about baptism, and how it should be practiced.

Martin Luther, 1483–1546, is another important figure to look at because he was one of the leaders of the reformation. He wanted to make some changes to the Catholic religion, though he ended up forming a different tradition. For this reason he is often called the father of Protestantism. The people who followed him formed one of the first protestant churches, the Lutheran tradition, named after Luther himself. Luther wrote many documents about changes he saw necessary in the Roman Catholic Church, and as they disagreed with him, the tradition eventually began to split from the main church into a separate tradition. He had some changes about many things, and differed from the Catholic Church on baptism, so it is important to look at his view. Luther was one of the most influential people of the reformation, and he expressed strongly his views about baptism.

John Calvin, 1509–1564, formed another part of the reformation. Calvin was one of Luther's contemporaries. He was influential in starting what is known as the Reformed tradition, also sometimes referred to as Calvinism. Calvin, like Luther before him, declared many changes he found necessary in the life of the church. He took a further step away from the church than Luther had, but declared his beliefs very strongly. Calvin gives us a look at the origins of the beliefs of baptism, especially in the Presbyterian tradition. Through Calvin we can see a slightly different variation from the Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation on the issue of baptism.

We must also look then, at the Anabaptists, the start of a more radical reformation, and the origin of the Baptist denominations today. Menno Simons, 1496–1561, was an important leader of one of the Anabaptist groups. It is most important to look at the Anabaptist tradition, because their baptismal tradition is the main point of contention about baptism, even today. The Anabaptist tradition was growing up around the time of the Reformation, although some groups started even before Luther. The Anabaptist tradition began with a completely new concept. They wanted to take baptism back to its roots in the Bible, and only perform baptism on people who would believe. This was a big change from the other traditions, and continues to be a dividing point today.

By looking at the starting points for these various traditions we can see how far apart their views were from one another in that day. Each represents their own tradition and we can compare and contrast the different historical views from one another. This gives a good basis for comparison to the views today. Looking at the historical views can also help us to understand from where the various traditions were spawned. It allows us to understand the need for different traditions back in the day of the reformers. This will

then be compared to the need for different traditions today, so we can see how it has changed since the time of the reformers.

The thesis then moves on to the viewpoints of the various traditions today. It first looks at integral documents that are conversations about a common understanding of baptism. These documents show that the various traditions have already wanted to come to a more common understanding in baptism. It is such an important part of becoming a Christian that traditions today would like to come to an ability to at least recognize a commonality between the various views of baptism. This would allow people to be in better conversation with one another about their differences and similarities.

The thesis addresses various viewpoints about baptism today and specifically about how coming to a more common understanding of baptism either would work or not work for each tradition. We first take a look at the Catholic response to conversations about a more common understanding of baptism. Catholicism has seemed to change a lot in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and they have become increasingly accepting of viewpoints other than their own. They are willing to recognize the validity of other's beliefs, even if they would not adopt them personally. It is important to compare their beliefs now with their history, and see if it has changed to allow a closer conversation with other traditions about baptism.

We move then from Catholicism to other views of infant baptism today. Lutheranism and Presbyterianism are two of the mainstream traditions of Protestant belief in the United States today. By taking a more in depth look at how they relate to their history, and to the other traditions around them, we can see how the views of baptism have developed over the course of their traditions. Both traditions are very similar in that they, as well as the Catholics, practice infant baptism. It is important then



to see if their differences are substantial, or if they can come in closer conversation and possibly agreement with one another about the issue of baptism.

We then come to the Baptist traditions of today. Baptist churches spawned out of the Anabaptist tradition of old. As they still practice in believer's baptism, this tradition is very important to the conversation of a more common understanding of baptism. In order to look closer at this tradition we must see how it relates to the Anabaptist tradition of old, compared to where the Baptist tradition stands today. The dividing line between baptism issues usually falls on believer's baptism vs. infant baptism. Therefore, putting the Baptist tradition in conversation with the infant baptism traditions is very important. From here we can see if a closer conversation between these two different concepts of baptism is possible, and where it could possibly lead.

This thesis shows the different traditions and how the relations have changed throughout the years. One must look at the traditions today and decide if the traditions are closer today than they were before, or farther apart. In this way we can look at the tradition and decide if baptism can bring denominations closer together. Steps back towards a single common understanding of baptism would be long and difficult. However, this thesis strives to see where the traditions are at this point in time, and seeks to give a better understanding of the reasons for the differences and the possibilities for connections.

# I

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## Historical View

Historically baptism has been important because Christians recognize it as an important step to becoming a Christian. In order to understand why there are different views about baptism in today's Christianity, we must first take a look at some of the original reformers, and their various conceptions of baptism. Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Simons will give us an understanding of where the different beliefs about baptism came from. They each represent a different tradition, and allow us to see in the very beginning of the formation of the beliefs that various traditions hold today.

### Augustine's View

Although he affirmed the practice of infant baptism, Augustine himself was not baptized until he was 33, because it was then that he converted to Christianity. Augustine followed the Roman Catholic doctrine of "original sin." He held that as children we inherit the sins of our parents and our ancestors before them, and that we are guilty because of the fall of humanity back with Adam and Eve. Augustine then held that Christian infants are born guilty and sinful, and that they are automatically damned from birth. He says, "The soul of the infant ... contracted from Adam the sin that is removed by the grace of that sacrament [baptism]."<sup>4</sup> Augustine, then, held that baptism saves us

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<sup>4</sup> Augustine. "Letter 98." To Boniface, bishop of Cataqua, who had asked Augustine various questions about baptism, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Part II-Letters: Volume 1: Letters 1-99. trans. Roland Teske, S.J., ed. John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York: New City Press, 2001), 427.

from this original sin. Thus, if an infant of a murderer was baptized, it would be saved, whereas an innocent woman's unbaptized infant would not.<sup>5</sup>

The baptism would not save the infant from all their sins they must do other things for that to happen. It is just a protection from the inherited "original sin" concept. Augustine then thought that infants needed to be baptized, as protection, until they were old enough to do confession, and be forgiven for their sins. This supported the practice of infant baptism, as people would not want to think of their infants being damned. This view would be an incentive for many to baptize their children as soon as they could. Fortunately, Augustine believed also that the damned infants would have little punishment, as they had personally done nothing wrong.<sup>6</sup>

Catholicism has remained fairly steady on this issue throughout the years. Many Popes have written bulls about the support of infant baptism. They say that the children who die unbaptized will lose sight of God, and will remain unblessed. On June 17<sup>th</sup>, 1546 a statement at the Council of Trent said, "For in virtue of this rule of faith handed down from the apostles, even infants who could not as yet commit any sin of themselves, are for this reason truly baptized for the remission of sins, in order that in them what they contracted by generation may be washed away by regeneration."<sup>7</sup> Views to the contrary have not been offered within the church very often, and it remains apart of Catholic dogma. In fact, even as late as 1893 Herman Schell wrote a document that would give more mercy to those infants who had died unbaptized, he was protested against greatly.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Moody, Dale. *Baptism, Foundation for Christian Unity* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press: 1967), 15-17.

<sup>6</sup> Augustine. "Enchiridion, 93," in Moody, *Baptism*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> Schroeder, Henry J. "Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent," in Moody, *Baptism*, 17.

<sup>8</sup> Auflage, Zweite. "Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart," in Moody, *Baptism*, 16-18.

In the question of needing faith to be baptized, there are vague answers given within the church at this time. Augustine emphasizes personal faith as necessary; however, he does not explain very well how it fits into infant baptism. Even Augustine himself says, "If faith is lacking, baptism does not save."<sup>9</sup> Augustine relies on the faith of the people presenting the child to be baptized and also states that the child receives faith because it is baptized. He states, "...even if that faith that is found in the will of believers does not make a little one a believer, the sacrament of the faith itself, nonetheless, now does so."<sup>10</sup> Augustine believes that the child will receive the faith regardless of the faith of the parents, if the child is presented for baptism.

#### Luther's View

Martin Luther's view is very similar to Augustine's. However, Luther thought, in contrast to Roman Catholicism, "Faith is the gift of God, not the work of man."<sup>11</sup> Thus Luther believed that Christ gave the faith to the child within the sacrament of baptism. Luther believes that the water is activated by God's grace to be the saving presence in the person. The water alone would not be enough, but during the baptism, the presence of God is with us.<sup>12</sup> He sees baptism as a work of God. Luther says, "Baptism, too, is a work of God, not invented by man but commanded by God and witnessed to by the gospel."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Moody, *Baptism*, 18.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, "Letter 98," 432.

<sup>11</sup> Moody, *Baptism*, 122.

<sup>12</sup> Moody, *Baptism*, 122-125.

<sup>13</sup> Luther, Martin. "Concerning Rebaptism," in *Luther's Works: American Edition*, Vol 40: Church and Ministry II. ed. Conrad Bergendoff, General Editor Helmut T. Lehmann. (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 239.

Luther goes on to say that we should not then doubt our baptism, because that would doubt God's work. If we then refuse to practice baptism because they are children, we are actually refusing to believe in the work of God. Luther also states, "He sins against God who will not believe it." Luther is referring to the practice of rebaptism. Luther says that as those who would reject their original baptism by becoming rebaptized, that they are sinning against God himself. In this Luther is affirming the practice of infant baptism as valid because it is God's own work.<sup>14</sup>

Luther then affirms that we are saved from the original sin, by the grace of God, and that declaration of faith is not necessary by the infant for the baptism to take place. Luther uses Scripture to show that there are many examples of children who have believed without speaking or understanding. Luther uses the example of the faith of John the Baptist believing in his mother's womb because of Jesus in Mary's womb. He goes on to say that Christ instills faith in children of every age during baptism, as he did to John in the womb.<sup>15</sup> He states, "Since then he [Christ] is present, speaks and baptizes, why should not his Word and baptism call forth spirit and faith in the child as then it produced faith in John?" Thus, even though Luther believed in the necessity of faith, he believed that it was possible for infants to have faith through Christ.

Luther saw baptism as a necessity. Infants received faith in the baptism, which carried them throughout their Christian lives. In his Catechism Luther states about baptism that, "It effects forgiveness of sins, delivers from death and the devil, and grants eternal salvation to all who believe, as the Word and promise of God declare."<sup>16</sup> He is

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<sup>14</sup> Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism," 239.

<sup>15</sup> Luther, "Concerning Rebaptism," 242-243.

<sup>16</sup> Luther, Martin. "Small Catechism," in *The spirit and origins of American Protestantism*, (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1968), 54.

saying that baptism prepares us for a life in Christ. We are baptized through the water, which is holy from God's Grace. Baptism thus serves as the first step into a relationship with God. We are already connected to God, and as we can grow up, we can grow into the community of believers.

Luther saw this ability to be included in the community from childhood as important. Baptism gives us a sense of community from when we are children, because we all share that common bond within a church community. Luther saw this as something that would be missing from a church where children were not baptized.<sup>17</sup> As baptized children grew up in a church, they are a part of the church, and unbaptized children might be missing an important link with God.

Luther's friend and mentor Melancthon wrote the Augsburg Confession. This is an important document written during the Reformation period, and Luther agreed with its original edition. In the Confession it states the accepted view of baptism. The document states "It is taught among us that Baptism is necessary and that grace is offered through it. Children, too, should be baptized, for in baptism they are committed to God and become acceptable to him."<sup>18</sup> In this we can see that most agreed with Luther's point of view about baptism. Again we see that baptism is considered necessary, and that children should be received as a part of the community of God by receiving baptism. It is important to understand that Luther's view was taken on by many and is the basis for the Lutheran views of baptism today.

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<sup>17</sup> Moody, *Baptism*, 125-126.

<sup>18</sup> Melancthon. "Augsburg Confession," in *The spirit and origins of American Protestantism*, (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1968), 17.

### Calvin's View

John Calvin also believed that infants should be baptized as children. Calvin calls upon the words of Christ and talks of Christ's acceptance of the little children. Calvin argues that if the kingdom of God belonged to the children, why could they not be also baptized.<sup>19</sup> Calvin sees Christ accepting the children, and letting them come to him, even when the disciples denied them. Calvin states, "If it be reasonable for infants to be brought to Christ, why is it not allowable to admit them to baptism, the symbol of our communion and fellowship with Christ?"<sup>20</sup> He argues that Christ saw the children as a part of the community, just as anyone else, and that they too should be baptized. He sees that baptism allows them into covenant with God, and we should not separate them.

Calvin also believed in the presence of original sin in unbaptized children. He sees baptism as a purification, which would imply a need for purification. Calvin followed Augustine and Luther in their view that we are born as sinful creatures. Baptism is necessary in order to have freedom from this original sin, especially as children, who would have no other way to be free from sin. Children cannot confess, or ask for forgiveness. Yet Calvin says, "If they are born sinners, as both David and Paul affirm, either they must remain unacceptable and hateful to God, or it is necessary for them to be justified."<sup>21</sup> Like Luther, Calvin believes that the purpose of baptism is to be free from this original sin, but that we must be baptized as children. The baptism removes the sin from us as children, so that they may be a part of God's community.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*, (New Haven: Yale University Press: 1940), 10.

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter XVI, Section VII. Translated by John Allen. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1936), 609.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter XVI, Section XVII.

<sup>22</sup> Schenck, *Presbyterian Doctrine*, 8.

However, Calvin did not see the presence of God in the baptism itself. He did not understand it as Christ actively there in the sacrament, because Christ is in heaven. He also did not see baptism as only representing God's forgiveness or that we receive the grace from the baptism itself. We receive the grace of baptism from God, and it links us to God in heaven. Calvin held that Christians are born into the church of believers, if they are a part of the promised covenant.<sup>23</sup>

Baptism then connects us to God; it seals us to God and confirms what was already a part of God's promise to us as believers. Calvin states, "It follows, that the children of believers are not baptized, that they may thereby be made the children of God, as if they had before been strangers to the Church; but on the contrary, they are received into the Church by a solemn sign, because they already belonged to the body of Christ by virtue of the promise."<sup>24</sup> Calvin does not think baptism ultimately saves us, but rather that because we are already God's children we belong to the covenant and baptism seals this promise.

Calvin sees baptism as sealing our connection with God, and forgiving the original sin. The reason children can be baptized is that they are born into this community of believers. Calvin believed children had a right to be in covenant with God, just as the children of Jews in the Old Testament. As children we have this original sin, and baptism forgives this sin, so that we are restored to God. Now that we have been baptized, we have the ability to enter into a closer relationship with God, and be forgiven when we ultimately sin because of our human nature. It can be said that Calvin understood baptism not as salvation, since God had already determined that, but as sealing us to God

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<sup>23</sup> Schenck, *Presbyterian Doctrine*, 13–15.

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, Book IV, Chapter XXV, Section XXII.



as an accepted part of the Church. As he accepts that God has predestined our future, he understood that children who were baptized were destined for salvation, and those that died were not.<sup>25</sup>

Calvin, like Luther inspired many generations after to follow his teachings. One of the most inspirational documents of the Reformed churches was known as the Heidelberg Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism was based on the principles of Calvin and Zwingli, another influential source in the beginnings of the Reformed church. The catechism says that infants are allowed into baptism, "...because they, as well as their parents, are included in the covenant and belong to the people of God."<sup>26</sup> The catechism goes on to say that redemption and faith are then promised to these children, and that by baptism, they are to enter into covenant with God. We can see that Calvin was influential, and his views were in accordance with many others of his time. Calvin formed a tradition that has lasted since his time, and was important in giving understanding to how baptism was viewed in this Reformed tradition.

#### Menno Simons and the Anabaptist's View

In contrast to Augustine, Luther, and Calvin are the Anabaptists.<sup>27</sup> The Anabaptist view believed that children should not be baptized until they were believers, thus the term "believer's baptism." The Anabaptist movement started because they saw no reports of infant baptism in the scriptures. They saw baptism as associated with repentance, which

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<sup>25</sup> Schenck, *Presbyterian Doctrine*, 9, 16-17.

<sup>26</sup> Ursinus, Zacharias and Olevian, Casper. "The Heidelberg Catechism," in *The spirit and origins of American Protestantism*, (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1968), 66-77.

<sup>27</sup> Although the Anabaptists are stated as last in the list of the historical views, they are not necessarily last historically. They were actually formed around the time of the Reformation, and some traditions started even before. They are last to emphasize their difference from the other historical views.

they saw as impossible for infants or young children. They also did not see children as born automatically into the faith of their parents; the movement saw a need for something more concrete to affirm the baptized person's belief in Christ.<sup>28</sup>

There are several things that represent the Anabaptist movement's beliefs about baptism. First of all, they believed that as Christ died for our sins, that after his death we do not automatically receive sin in our birth. Thus, we are born into salvation, but this means we can and should affirm this belief through baptism, after we declare our faith. They thus believe that children, who die before they are baptized, are not doomed to be damned, and that because of Christ's death they are already saved. The Anabaptists see that the only way into the church should be through this believer's baptism.<sup>29</sup>

The Anabaptist movement saw baptism as a symbol of their belief. Baptism is not meaningless, for it is necessary to be accepted into the church of believers, but it does not give a person salvation in itself. When a person reaches a certain age, they will be able to state a belief and acceptance of Christ, and thus be baptized. Before this age, a child is still accountable for their actions, and should express forgiveness in wrongs done, but it does not indicate a readiness for acceptance.<sup>30</sup>

Menno Simons is one of the founders of a part of the Anabaptist movement called the Mennonites. Even to this day, the words Anabaptist and Mennonite are fairly interchangeable. Menno says that even if infants had the faith that others said they have, it would not be a true faith. In order to have faith one must hear and listen and this is impossible for young children to do. Simons says that children must wait until they can truly hear and understand the Word of God before they express true belief. Simons

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<sup>28</sup> Moody, *Baptism*, 223–225.

<sup>29</sup> Moody, *Baptism*, 225–226.

<sup>30</sup> Moody, *Baptism*, 226.

reinforces that, "If they [children] die before coming to years of discretion . . . then they die under the promise of God, and that by no other means than generous promise of grace given through Jesus Christ."<sup>31</sup>

Simons sees the view that children are believers by nature of their parent's belief as wrong. He says that we can never know the true nature of human hearts, and how are we to judge whether anyone is a true Christian or not.<sup>32</sup> This is why they believe that it is important until to wait until the person can be baptized because of a personal belief, to verify that it is true and holy. The Mennonites see this as important so that they can know that a person is ready to be admitted into the Kingdom of God. They see baptism as necessary, but only after belief is established.

#### Summary of Historical Views

We can see then, the essential differences between the various historical views of baptism. Augustine represents the church before the reformation, and portrays the tradition that the reformation grew out of. He understood baptism as necessary for removing original sin from a child at birth, and that if this was not performed the child would not be saved if it died. Sacraments such as baptism usually required some kind of faith, as the sacrament is a symbol of that faith, yet with baptism, it was unclear where this faith came from. It was suggested that it possibly came from the faith of the parents, or within the sacrament of baptism itself.

Luther held a similar understanding, yet he thought that the baptism represented different things than the Roman Catholic Church thought it did. One of the reasons he

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<sup>31</sup> Simons, Menno. "Christian Baptism," in *Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, trans. Leonard Verduin, ed. John Christian Wenger (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 241

<sup>32</sup> Simons, "Christian Baptism," 252.

declared a change was needed in the way Catholicism thought about baptism is that normally faith is required for a sacrament to be sufficient. However, in baptism, Luther saw that where the faith of the child came from, was never quite clear. Luther then proposed that faith was given to the child through God, and that this was sufficient enough, along with Christ's presence within the baptism, to save the child. While only slightly different from the Catholic tradition, it was enough to separate the one from the other.

Calvin took the whole thing a little farther than Luther. Like Luther and Augustine, Calvin saw baptism as freedom from original sin. However, Calvin did not think that Christ was physically in the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is our connection to Christ, and symbolizes our new relationship with God. Through this connection, we are linked to Christ and his salvation, and we are rid of original sin. Baptism puts us in closer relationship to God, and allows us to start a life free from sin, with the ability to continue this relationship and be forgiven for further sins. This is slightly different from the other traditions as they saw baptism as us physically receiving the presence of God.

Menno Simons, as one of the leaders of the Anabaptist tradition, gave a different view. The Anabaptist tradition saw the ways that the child receives faith as a weak understanding of baptism. They did accept that the faith of the parents, or the presence of God would give faith to the children, in order for them to be baptized. The only way the Anabaptist tradition could believe that someone had faith to be baptized was for them to personally declare it. In order for this to happen, they had to be of an age to understand what the baptism meant, and accept Christ into their life, declaring a personal faith. This was something the other traditions saw as unnecessary and they spoke out against the Anabaptist tradition, and their apparent unbelief of how baptism worked.

There were similarities between the infant baptism traditions in historical times. All understood baptism as necessary for infants, because it saved them from the original sin that all humanity suffers with when born. They were separated on other issues of where the faith came in, and how the faith was installed in a child at baptism, but the understanding of how baptism worked, was relatively similar to one another. However, then with the believer's baptism, many new issues arose and a huge gap was formed between the traditions.

## II

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### Current Views on Baptism

Conversations on Baptism have been going on for centuries. Various Christian traditions are trying to talk about finding more commonality among them about the subject of baptism, because it is such an integral part of the Christian community. There is much understanding between many churches, yet there is still a gap to cross. The biggest problem is still how to reconcile those who practice in infant baptism and those who practice believer's baptism. The Roman Catholic Church and most mainline Protestant churches such as Lutherans and Presbyterians hold the practice of infant baptism, though they may vary a little on the details. Groups such as the Southern Baptists practice believer's baptism and do not think that one should be baptized before expressing faith in Christ.

#### Baptism Eucharist and Ministry Document

There have been many important conversations going on throughout the years about baptism between all Christian traditions. The biggest and most well known of these has gone on among a group called the World Council of Churches.<sup>33</sup> The WCC has members from many different Christian traditions, in many countries and many different cultures. The WCC has a subgroup called the Faith and Order Commission, which puts together various documents on unity, including one of the most influential about baptism, entitled

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<sup>33</sup> Hereafter referred to as WCC.

*Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*.<sup>34</sup> This document reflects the views and conversation of the diverse membership of the WCC, and also portrays many various conversations with churches around the world. This paper seeks to come to a common understanding, or at least conversation about baptism.

There are many common understandings that have been reached through the document, and the various traditions have learned a lot from one another.<sup>35</sup> The document goes through and outlines the conversation and conclusions reached, and then have commentaries on what the WCC thinks still needs to be worked on. This document is very important, and has been drawn into much conversation since its publication in 1982. It is the beginning of what seems to be a large attempt to reconcile differences between various traditions on the subject of Baptism.

There were many key issues of the meaning of Baptism that were agreed upon in this document. All believed that baptism comes from Christ and that it is a gift from God, through the Holy Spirit. "The Holy Spirit is at work in the lives of people before, in and after their baptism,"<sup>36</sup> It is important to note that these are all central points of baptism, and that there is a common understanding between all Christian traditions that baptism is a gift from God. As the very basis of baptism, it is good to start with a common foundation for where baptism is coming from.

Another important collective understanding is that baptism represents only the beginning of one's life as a Christian. Baptism is not then just a one-time thing, but is related to our whole life in the church.<sup>37</sup> Thus this is important because in every

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<sup>34</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry, Faith and Order Paper No. 111*. (Geneva: WCC, 1982), xi. Hereafter referred to as BEM.

<sup>35</sup> BEM, ix.

<sup>36</sup> BEM, 2.

<sup>37</sup> BEM, 4.

tradition, to make Baptism valid, we as Christians must continue to acknowledge our baptism and live a life in Christ. All traditions recognize the importance of nurturing this growth in Christ and the continuing relationship to Christ that baptism brings. We must all together continue our life in Christ, reaffirming our relationship with Christ as believers.

It is also stated that, "Christians are brought into union with Christ, with each other and with the Church of every time and place."<sup>38</sup> The document says that baptism should be a unifying bond for all Christians. However, in order for this to happen, we must all recognize each other's baptisms as valid. If we say that we are unified, yet do not claim to understand or support another's differing view of baptism, then we are not unified at all. We can give a unified front, but until all traditions accept all Christian baptism as valid, we cannot claim a common understanding or acceptance.

The document goes on to say that, "Churches are increasingly recognizing one another's baptism as the one baptism into Christ."<sup>39</sup> This happens as long as there is a statement of faith from the person being baptized or their community of believers and later the individual themselves. It also urges churches to directly express their recognition of other's baptisms. This seems at least a very big step towards a common unity of baptism. The document states these common understandings, but the churches still have to actually declare their acceptance of one another. However, having these statements held from a common understanding from many traditions is very important to the steps towards a more unified view on baptismal practices.

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<sup>38</sup> BEM, 3.

<sup>39</sup> BEM, 6.



This document also recognizes the essential difference between infant baptism and believer's baptism. It is agreed upon that the meaning of baptism is consistent, and that it should be done within a Christian community. However, the commentary expresses that the difference is between those who baptize at any age, and those who require a confession of faith from the person before baptism occurs.<sup>40</sup> It is not that those who practice infant baptism will not baptize unless you are infants, only that those who require a confession of faith do not believe that infants or small children would be able to express faith in Christ before being baptized.

The BEM document offers a solution, however, at least to be considered by various churches. It refers to some churches that practice both infant-baptism and believer-baptism. The compromise would be that those baptized as infants would later make a statement of faith, or those baptized after a confession would receive a blessing in infancy.<sup>41</sup> The document then asks churches to think about this as a compromise. It may be asking churches to ignore the importance of their theology of baptism. But it would also allow for recognition that God can use baptism of any form for the same good. This is a reasonable compromise, but it seems easier for the churches practicing infant baptism to except. They already practice baptism in adulthood, at least occasionally. It seems that it is still asking the Baptist churches to except the validity of a baptism without faith, which is the reason they require a statement of faith first.

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<sup>40</sup> BEM, 4-5.

<sup>41</sup> BEM, 5.

### Current Catholic Views

The document also asked for responses from churches, in order to get a general idea of the various traditions responses to these conversations of compromise. The Roman Catholic Church of the U.S. made such a response, and mostly they seemed to agree with the document. There were four questions put forth for the churches to answer. The first was, "To what extent can your church recognize in this text the faith of the Church through the ages?"<sup>42</sup> The Catholic responses regarding baptism are positive. The Catholic Church says that they agree with their statements about baptism, and that they too are working towards a common acceptance of baptism. They state, "The fact that baptism is not repeated and that we as Catholic Christians recognize the sacramentality of the baptism of other Christian churches has been an important ecumenical step toward fuller ecclesial unity."<sup>43</sup> This is a very important statement because it shows that they recognize the baptisms of other traditions as valid.

The Catholic response explicitly agrees with the statement in the BEM about the fact that baptism should take place within a church community. They also state that they will not have a problem excepting the believer's baptism practiced by some churches, as long as it is a mutual recognition, where those churches also accept the baptism of infants and children. The Catholic response is that they have been prepared to accept baptisms from other churches, and this document only proves to initiate closer conversations with other traditions.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry: Initial Reactions from Roman Catholic Dioceses in the United States*, (National Association of Diocesan Ecumenical Officers, 1986), 9.

<sup>43</sup> *BEM: Catholic Response*, 9.

<sup>44</sup> *BEM: Catholic Response*, 9.

There were only a few things that the Catholic response had slight issues with. Some were worried about the glossing over of the difference between believer's baptism and infant baptism. It was questioned whether the traditions were really as similar as might be described. The question lies in that Baptists see baptism as a sign of God's grace and acceptance, which does not fit with the Catholic notion of baptism as a sacrament.<sup>45</sup> Though later in the document it is declared that even though there are many different definitions of sacrament that this should not get in the way of a declaration of common understanding of baptism.<sup>46</sup>

Mostly it is important to understand that the Catholic Church is willing to continue conversations with the protestant churches about the importance of baptism. They are willing to discuss about a common understanding of baptism. This is important in that baptism is such a central part of being a Christian, and we can see that many traditions long for a change towards a commonality between traditions in regards to the practice of baptism. The Catholic Church has a big role in saying that they will accept protestant baptisms. After all, it is the protestant denominations that broke away from the Catholic Church because of differences in understanding. Thus, this closer conversation about baptism can help bring us closer to the division that stood between the Catholic and protestant traditions for many years.

#### Current Lutheran Views

In an essay about the baptism of infants, Eugene Brand states, "... the New Testament makes it clear that one is not a member of the fellowship by natural birth but only by

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<sup>45</sup> BEM: *Catholic Response*, 10.

<sup>46</sup> BEM: *Catholic Response*, 31.

water and the Spirit. It is, therefore, unnatural to keep the children even partially outside the larger Christian family in which the parents share.” Brand’s essay outlines the Lutheran view of Infant Baptism as it is today. Although he stresses many problems with their practices today, he makes statements about what they still hold to be true. He says that the Lutheran church still holds baptism as necessary for infants, to tie them to the community of believers, and begin their life in the church.<sup>47</sup>

In an essay entitled “Baptism and the Unity of the Church in Ecumenical Dialogues,” André Birmelé writes about many traditions that have been in conversation with one another about baptism. Most of these dialogues have been post BEM and continuing the inter-faith dialogue on Baptism. An Anglican and Lutheran dialogue that took place in 1972 yet was repeated several times in documents since BEM states a common understanding of baptism for these denominations. Their statement on baptism said that baptism with water, in the name of the triune God, is how God brings us into the Church of God. Their statement goes on to say that faith continues to be necessary to receive a sacrament, and that with infant baptism this faith is provided later, usually by confirmation.<sup>48</sup>

The Lutheran and Methodist dialogue, also in 1984, was only a slightly different agreement. The difference was that Lutheran baptism “establishes church membership,” whereas the Methodist tradition usually separates membership into two parts. The first part is through baptism, and then church membership is only completed through a

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<sup>47</sup> Brand, Eugene L. “Baptism and Communion of Infants: A Lutheran View,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*. ed. Maxwell E. Johnson. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 355-356.

<sup>48</sup> André Birmelé, “Baptism and the Unity of the Church in Ecumenical Dialogues,” in *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*. ed. Micheal Root and Risto Saarinen (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 110-111.

profession of faith.<sup>49</sup> This still is a common understanding with both a baptism and a profession of faith leading into admission in the church and body of Christ.

### Current Presbyterian Views

In the Presbyterian tradition it is "understood" that at least one of the parents of the child baptized is a baptized Christian. The parents then confess their faith in God, and their intention to raise the child in a Christian household. They promise to guide their child, once old enough, to "a personal profession of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord and into full Communion with the Church."<sup>50</sup> Baptism is seen as the initial experience that ties one into the church of God.

The Baptismal vows are taken by the parents and its up to the parents to guide the child to his full potential in the church. They take on the responsibility of teaching the child the ways of the church, and the beliefs that they as Christians hold. The congregation is often asked to support the parents in their undertaking of teaching this child. Thus we can see that in response to a concern about the baptism not having a lasting effect on the child, that it is the responsibility of those who bring it up in a church to make sure it has the correct teachings.

In a 1967 Confessional Document by the Presbyterian Church it is stated, "Baptism with water represents not only cleansing from sin but a dying Christ and a joyful rising with him to new life."<sup>51</sup> In this statement we can see that the Church continues to view baptism as the way we are washed clean of our original sin. It also

<sup>49</sup> Birmelé, *Baptism in Dialogues*, 112.

<sup>50</sup> Mackay, John A. *The Presbyterian Way of Life*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1960), 158.

<sup>51</sup> United Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. "Presbyterian Confession of 1967," in *The spirit and origins of American Protestantism* (Dayton, Ohio: Pflaum Press, 1968), 167.

signifies our closeness with Christ in baptism, as we enter into the church of believers.

Because we are tied to Christ we will be tied to his new life in heaven as well.

The document goes on to say, "It commits all Christians to die each day to sin and to live for righteousness. In baptism the church celebrates the renewal of the covenant with which God has bound his people to himself."<sup>52</sup> The church is affirming that we keep our baptism renewed by confessing our sins to God, but that baptism is the first step we take to cleanse ourselves. Baptism seals the connection between God and us and guides our faith in constant renewal with him. We can also remember our own baptism continually through the church, keeping anew our relationship with God.

#### Current Baptist Views

Baptist churches have also been responding to this conversation for many years, especially since the BEM document came out. An essay by S. Mark Heim represents much of the debate going on in Baptist churches today regarding these conversations about coming to a closer agreement with various traditions about baptism.<sup>53</sup> Heim begins by saying that Baptists began to argue for believer's baptism because the scriptures in the New Testament had led them to believe that this was the method originally intended.<sup>54</sup>

He also says that the other thing important to the conversation of baptism is that Baptist churches do not see baptism as needed for salvation or as the way into the Church of Christ. Christian unity, entrance into the Church and mutual understanding of

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<sup>52</sup> Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., "Confession," 167.

<sup>53</sup> In this thesis Heim represents a fairly mainline view of Baptist churches, but as a part of their denominational views they do not have creeds or statements of faith that every different Baptist tradition would agree on. Thus "Baptist" view may or may not apply to individual cases or churches.

<sup>54</sup> S. Mark Heim, "Baptismal Recognition and the Baptist Churches," in *Baptism and the Unity of the Church*, ed. Michael Root and Risto Saarinen (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co; Geneva: WCC Publications, 1998), 151.

Christianity with other churches exist in an acceptance of Christ by the believer.<sup>55</sup> This means that for Baptists the baptism is only the sign of the fact that the believer has been initiated into the church. Most Baptists then practice baptism, but the baptism itself is not necessary for entrance into the church, that comes with an acceptance of Christ.

Heim goes on to say that this is part of the reason that Baptists have trouble accepting infant baptism. In infant baptism they do not see this central belief of acceptance as entrance into the Church. Baptists worry that in infant baptism there is never a profession of faith as they have in the Baptist tradition. In their tradition Baptism should not be separated from this confession of faith. This is important in understanding in terms of a conversation about baptism. In order to come to a common understanding of baptism the traditions need to be on the same page. Heim's Baptist church sees baptism as only a representation of the declaration of faith, which could pose a problem for conversations of baptismal unity.<sup>56</sup>

Heim states that a unifying view of baptism is not impossible for Baptist believers to accept. In fact, Baptists agree with the statements in the BEM about the possibility of church's recognizing each other's baptism as valid. The paragraph expressly states that this recognition is occurring, "when Jesus Christ has been confessed as Lord by the candidate, or in the case of infant baptism, when confession has been made by the church and later affirmed by personal faith and commitment."<sup>57</sup> Thus the Baptist churches would recognize an infant baptism later accompanied by a personal confession from the

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<sup>55</sup> Heim, *Baptismal Recognition*, 151–152.

<sup>56</sup> Heim, *Baptismal Recognition*, 154–155.

<sup>57</sup> Heim, *Baptismal Recognition*, 156.

individual. Before this recognition would occur from the Baptist church, either conformation or a personal statement of faith would be required.<sup>58</sup>

This personal confession is the key to acceptance by Baptists of a valid baptism. It is important to realize that denominations that practice infant baptism might not like the idea of a required profession of faith later in life, thus signifying that the infant baptism was somehow lacking. However, this seems the only way to come to an effective common understanding of baptism. If Baptist churches can accept a confession later in life, and other traditions were willing to incorporate this into their practices, a connection might be reached between infant baptism and believer's baptism.

#### Summary of Current Views

When looking at the problem of this mutual acceptance of baptism, it will come down to the traditions of the church. A common understanding between churches that administer infant baptism is not as difficult to achieve as a common understanding between infant baptism and adult baptism. Within the traditions that administer infant baptism, there is an understanding that faith comes from the community surrounding the infant, and that the faith continues to be nurtured throughout the child's life, until it is ready to accept Christ of its own accord. The traditions administering believer's baptism however, accept people into the Church on the basis of their statement of faith, and the baptism is then a representation of that faith.

Although there are many problems not quite resolved within the BEM's statements on baptism, it seems to have the closest conversation of commonality. It does not seem possible to reconcile between the infant and believer's baptism without some

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<sup>58</sup> Heim, *Baptismal Recognition*, 156-157.



kind of statement of faith made by the infant baptism tradition. On the other hand, it is still uncertain whether the traditions with infant baptism are ready to accept the fact that believer's baptism is only a representation of this statement of faith.

The traditions that administer infant baptism talk to one another easily about commonalities within their practices of baptism. All hold that the child is able to receive baptism and have it be effective. These traditions are not against adult baptism, though they strongly declare that one baptism is all that is necessary. They would not turn away anyone of any age who wished to be baptized for the first time. Thus traditions with infant baptism are willing to be in conversation about baptism within believer's baptism churches. Although some seem skeptical about the specifics involved in the emphasis placed on the confessional, and not the baptism.

Baptist churches and others who administer believer's baptism seem to have a harder time being in acceptance or conversation with those who administer infant baptism. It is not that they are against trying to listen to what the other traditions have to say. However, the differences in theology lead them to be unwilling to join with traditions that administer infant baptism. In believer's baptism, the confession is the absolute most important thing, and having the baptism without seems invalid to these traditions. The compromise of a later confession to complete the baptism sounds appealing to some, but would not satisfy all in recognizing infant baptism as valid.

### III

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## What can we learn from this study?

The thesis will now attempt to put all the previous information in conversation with the other views. This chapter addresses the question of the thesis, as to how a conversation about baptism would lead churches into closer conversation with one another. One must look to find closer unity or recognition of the validity in many traditions of baptism. One must also consider the holes, gaps and disagreements barring the way, and how traditions can work past those obstacles. We can start to answer these questions, first by putting the historical views in conversation with their contemporaries.

#### Augustine vs Current Catholic Views

Traditions do not stay the same over centuries. Change itself is the only sure thing. So the question is then, how much have traditions changed in their views of baptism, or even their attitude about baptism? We began in the Roman Catholic tradition before there was more than one Christian tradition, with Augustine. Augustine fiercely held that infants should be baptized as soon as possible, so that they would avoid being damned if they died. The Catholic Church still abides by the doctrine of original sin, and accepts that one should be baptized as a child to be free from original sin. That notion has remained the same. However, the Catholic Church agrees to recognize other baptisms as true and valid. This would have been unheard of in the day of the reformation, and even until after Vatican II.

We can see then a dramatic change because even though the traditions slightly differ on what actually happens in baptism, the Catholic Church is willing to recognize other baptisms, accepting other traditions along with their own. This does not mean that the Catholic Church wishes to change their own traditions of baptism, but they are being more open to possibilities of how baptism can be meaningful for different traditions in different ways. This is a tremendous acceptance for this Christian tradition.

This leaves the Catholics in a good position to welcome and accept other traditions practicing infant baptism. Their belief that baptism is a sacrament makes it more difficult to work with the Baptist churches, but it is not impossible. Through conversation with Baptist churches, the two traditions could come to a more common understanding of baptism, even if they do not agree on all details of the practice. The Catholic Church is leaving the possibility open to eventually be able to accept one another's traditions of baptism.

#### Luther vs Current Lutheran Views

Our second historical figure was Luther. Luther held that baptism erases our original sin, and that infants should be baptized. He held strongly that the presence and grace of Christ in the baptismal act gives the necessary faith to link us into baptism. Lutherans today, in dialogue with other traditions have declared that baptism with water brings us into the Church of God, and that the individual supplies faith later with a personal statement. This is not as Luther may have wanted it, for he saw faith and baptism as inseparable. We can see this is a change in the tradition in order to be in better conversation with other denominations about baptism. Again, the Lutheran Church may practice baptism and believe that their way is the only way. However, in order to have

closer conversation with other traditions about baptism, they have chosen to allow a statement of faith later in life, to confirm or reaffirm the baptism of an individual, mostly through the practice of confirmation.

This leaves the Lutheran tradition in a good place. They already are working on recognizing baptism with other various traditions of infant baptism. Like the Catholic Church, the Lutheran tradition is not unwilling to come to an understanding with the Baptist tradition. They have agreed on a possible statement of faith later in the person's life once they can more fully understand the concepts of baptism, and the faith they are receiving. With this understanding in place, they would be able to begin talking to the Baptist tradition about a closer common understanding of baptism.

#### Calvin vs Current Presbyterian Views

Our third historical figure was John Calvin. Calvin as one of the founders of the Reformed tradition had a strong belief in predestination. This meant that each person who was to be saved was already decided. Each person in this tradition would assume that as Christians they were saved and their children after them as well. So they, because they wanted to prepare their children, would have their children baptized. Calvin, also believing that baptism erases our original sin, thought that these children were rightly baptized. This baptism seals them to God, and starts their relationship with him, through the church. The child receives faith through the baptism, and the closer connection with God.

The Presbyterian Church, which rose from the Reformed tradition, follows these views closely today. Children are usually baptized, which then washes them from their original sin and begins their Christian ties to God and the church. The parents and the

church have the responsibility of teaching the child about God and encouraging the child to renew this relationship with God. They believe that it is important for the child to continue in this tradition and make a statement of faith later in their life, confirming their faith. This usually happens when a child becomes a member of a church during confirmation. They are asked to remember their baptism and state their faith in God for all to hear.

This tradition fits well with the other infant baptism traditions. The child is baptized as a child, and then later in life, usually confirmation or membership into a church, the child will confirm their belief in God. As well as the other traditions this tradition accepts baptism of adults as well as infants. Usually one must be baptized before being confirmed or becoming a member if one has not been baptized before.<sup>59</sup> This requirement is so that the church is affirmed in having the child baptized as a part of a Christian family, who will nourish the child in the Christian faith.

#### Menno Simons vs Current Baptist View

Our last historical figure was Menno Simons. Simons as a part of the Anabaptist tradition believed that one must first have faith, and a clear expression of that faith, and only then can one be baptized. Baptism was seen as the sign of the faith that you have declared. It was not seen as necessary for the removal of original sin, for the Anabaptists believed that this was not the case, that we do not receive original sin at birth. It was necessary for entrance into the church, but just as a sign of the faith of the new believer.

In the Baptist traditions today, it is still understood that the confession of faith links you with Christ, although the baptism is linked to your acceptance into the church

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<sup>59</sup> Mackay, *The Presbyterian Way*, 158.

itself. Their tradition has not changed much in their views on baptism since the days of Menno Simons. However, in conversations with other traditions, some Baptists have entertained that an infant baptism, with a later confession of faith, would allow a possibility for at least a recognition of acceptance in the baptism of other traditions.

It seems that in order for the Baptist traditions to begin recognizing infant baptism as valid, that the declaration of faith is needed later in life as a part of the baptism tradition in these churches. Because the declaration is what truly links one to God, without this step, the Baptist traditions cannot fully accept infant baptism. However, it seems that each tradition is willing to at least talk about putting this in place as a step towards a more common understanding, and possible recognition between traditions.

#### The Evangelical Covenant Church

It is clear that these traditions have all moved at least somewhat away from their original traditions of baptism. If only for the purpose of inter-faith dialogue on the question of baptism, they have made allowances that would not have happened in the past. There is a trend towards recognition of each other's traditions as valid forms of baptism. This conversation takes time, and needs to be discussed carefully, so one could never expect immediate results. We can, however, see that each tradition is at least thinking about baptism as such an important part of Christianity; that commonality must at least be discussed.

In comparison to this discussion, an important alternative needs to be addressed. Although not as old a tradition as these mainstream Protestant Churches, the Evangelical

Covenant Church was founded in 1885 in the United States by Swedish Immigrants.<sup>60</sup>

This tradition originally practiced infant baptism. However, according to a policy adopted by the church in 1998, "... the Covenant chooses to respect the biblical positions of both infant and believer baptism equally."<sup>61</sup> Members of the church then decide whether they want to practice infant or adult baptism. As a result, all Covenant pastors must be willing to perform both infant and adult baptism.

The Covenant Church is aware of the differences between the two views but wants to respect the diversity in people's needs and traditions. They would like to give people the option of either baptism, as fits their personal wants and needs. Part of the reason that they are willing to accept both traditions is that they view each as valid, and recognize that each have come from true devoted Christian traditions.<sup>62</sup> They also have steps in place to dedicate a child when it is young before later believer's baptism, or to have a reaffirmation of faith, when an infant who was baptized becomes able to declare this faith.

Although it accepts both traditions, the Covenant Church does not believe that rebaptism is a necessary practice. In a book on Covenant Affirmations, Donald Frisk writes, "we are in general agreement that both infant and believing adult baptism are valid baptisms, and they are to be respected as such. Hence rebaptism is to be inappropriate in Covenant Churches."<sup>63</sup> If they allowed rebaptism, they would not be

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<sup>60</sup> *Who We Are*. 2002 Evangelical Covenant Church. 27 Mar. 2002

<<http://www.covchurch.org/cov/home/howeare.html>>

<sup>61</sup> *Policy on Baptism*. 2002 Evangelical Covenant Church. 27 Mar. 2002

<<http://www.covchurch.org/cov/resources/baptism.html>>

<sup>62</sup> *Policy on Baptism*. 2002 Evangelical Covenant Church.

<sup>63</sup> Frisk, Donald C. *Covenant Affirmations: This we Believe*. (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1981), 137.

recognizing the infant baptism tradition as valid, as rebaptism is a practice for those who did not feel their first baptism was authentic.

This tradition is such an important example to the conversation of a common understanding of baptism. They have put aside the differences between the two traditions, and accept both as valid. They have achieved what many traditions have been talking about for many years. While recognizing the importance of both traditions, people are free to choose which way they want to go. It is also important that they affirm that every pastor in their church be willing to perform either way of baptizing an individual. They have made it a safe, comfortable environment for people of either tradition of infant or believer's baptism.

Frisk also responds to the question of how they could balance both traditions without throwing out doctrinal views altogether. How can the one coexist with the other? The tradition sees neither tradition as strongly emphasized in Scripture, and equal arguments could be made for either tradition. Baptism, because it is not just a one-time act, but follows through your whole life, can be continually used, no matter when you are baptized. It only represents the beginning of our Christian life, and thus either baptism could be used equally.<sup>64</sup>

Not all traditions are ready to take this enormous step into accepting and even practicing both within their churches. However, we can see that each tradition seems to be willing to talk about a common acceptance of baptism. There are many issues that need to be worked out and dealt with, but we are all moving in the right direction. We have an example of a tradition that has made both ways of baptism work side by side

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<sup>64</sup> Frisk, *Covenant Affirmations*, 136.



within the same congregation. This could encourage other traditions to at least work towards an acceptance of each other's baptisms.

### Answering the Question

In this study we have seen several different tradition's views on baptism. The underlying question is: can baptism work to bring traditions closer together? The answer is complicated but can be addressed in several different ways. The infant baptism traditions are very similar in how they administer baptism to their infants. The faith of the parents plays a large part, as well as the faith that comes to us through God in baptism. These infant baptism traditions can easily move closer together; and in fact many of them have been working on coming to a closer understanding or acceptance of each other's views of baptism.

In the churches that practice believer's baptism, we see a common understanding of the importance that lies in having a person be old enough to accept Christ and the responsibilities of becoming a Christian, before being baptized. Thus the statement or confession of faith that is made in these churches before baptism plays the largest part in the administration of baptism.

Baptism can bring denominations closer together within the two traditions of infant or believer's baptism. Yet, ultimately we have to answer no; baptism cannot bring all Christian denominations closer together. There is too large of a gap between the infant and believer's baptism that is unresolved. There are things within each tradition that hold too firm to their beliefs, which will not allow them any closer together. They can talk of compromise, of a dedication for infants in a Baptist church, of a statement of faith later for the infant baptized child.

Yet it stands that the believer's baptism churches will not recognize for the most part that an infant baptism is valid. If you would like to join their church, come on in, but first you must be baptized regardless of a baptism you have had as an infant. And for the infant baptism traditions, if someone from the church wanted to renew their baptism, it would not be possible, because they think this would invalidate the original infant baptism. They might offer up a rededication service or the like, or have you recommit your life to Jesus, but another baptism is out of the question.

Both traditions have valid reasons for sticking to what they practice. These traditions are long standing and it is important for them to not let go of that which is important to their understanding of church, and what makes a Christian a Christian. However, I would hope that someday, they could see beyond the doctrine, beyond the differences in theology, and come together to recognize that we truly are all one in Christ, that baptism should unify us and not hold us apart from one another.

In this thesis, I was ultimately hoping to find a way for various traditions to come closer together on the issue of baptism. I was glad to see that traditions, especially within the infant baptism tradition, are moving closer together. However, I was hoping to find a link even between the believer's and infant baptism traditions. I feel that the BEM document is a good start on a conversation about moving forward, however, it is not enough to bridge the gap between the two traditions. It addresses the need for an infant ceremony even in believer's baptism traditions and a declaration of faith in infant baptism traditions.

However, this still would only work for select churches in each tradition as the solution is only glossing over the importance of the tradition. No matter our tradition we cannot see into the heart and mind of a person. The believer's baptism tradition argues

that one must make this statement of faith and receive baptism to be truly accepted into God's church. Yet, how can they know for sure, how can they see into the heart of a person and know that they are truly understanding of the grace and glory of God? They could not know, the same way that infant baptism traditions can never truly see into the heart of an infant to know if they are filled with any remote faith or understanding of God.

I feel that the only way for the two traditions to move forward is for them to accept that God is all-powerful and we can never understand his workings. Somehow he could work through each tradition for the same end. Is it not possible for him to instill the faith into an infant; is it not possible for him to guide an adult to faith? I think the answer to either is yes. Thus we can see that God can work through any end to receive someone into his covenant. Thus either tradition could be the best way for those people to come into acceptance of God.

I do not think that any tradition should change the way they feel is best to administer baptism. I feel the best way to move forward is to come to an acceptance of each tradition as Christian, and thus that we are all one in Christ. Through this we are all baptized into Christ, and the baptism is valid in any tradition. If we can see that we can never truly understand all the workings of God, we can then understand that we should come together in our baptism and not let it push us apart from one another.

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