

Introduction

“Tepid” was the only fitting way to describe the water when Jonathan, the young pastoral intern, stepped into the baptistery. As is common among evangelical churches in the United States, the baptistery was a pool recessed in the sanctuary wall behind and above the pulpit. A large wooden cross towered immediately overhead, but the lights were positioned to ensure that its shadow fell harmlessly against the wall behind rather than upon the water beneath. Jonathan’s thin white robe floated on the surface of the water above his swimming trunks, producing a rather undignified feeling. He had never performed a baptism before, and his supervising minister wanted to give him some practice. So he found himself standing up to his ribs in water at the church’s Thanksgiving Eve service—a highly unusual time for a service, he thought, much less a baptismal one—watching the baptizand, Steven, descend the steps into the baptismal pool. Jonathan had met Steven for the first time in the little staging room behind the baptismal pool while changing clothes in preparation for the rite, and Jonathan now introduced Steven to the congregation via a microphone resting precariously on the pool’s edge. He then stepped back to give Steven access to the microphone so that he could give his testimony to the congregation in keeping with longstanding tradition among Free Church evangelicals.

Adrenaline began coursing through Jonathan’s body almost immediately as he listened to Steven describe his faith journey. Born, raised, and—here Jonathan could only stand in mute horror—baptized as an infant in a nominally Roman Catholic home, Steven had recently been drawn back to the church in its evangelical form. He consequently decided that he needed to be baptized “for real.” Jonathan’s mind initially ground to a halt, fixating on the thought: “I’m about to perform a rebaptism.” It then became frantic: “Is there some way out of this? Can I switch with my supervising minister? Can I switch with him in a way that communicates something other than rejection and dismissiveness to Steven and the congregation? Will my supervising minister even understand why this is an issue for me? What if I’m put in the awkward position of having to explain why the baptism that Steven desires ought to be withheld from him, while standing with him in the baptismal water?” Immobilized by such thoughts, the moment of potential escape flew past. Placating himself with the thought that his was a ministry under the authority

of others, Jonathan acquiesced and embarked upon the more ritualized aspect of the baptism by pronouncing the Triune Name over Steven while immersing him. However, this was complicated by Steven's considerable girth, which—as though to remove from his conscience the excuse of being a purely passive accessory to this rebaptism—provided a buoyancy requiring that Jonathan place his hand on Steven's chest and forcefully submerge him in the water.

Stories like this bring home the numerous complications that can and do arise when one moves from the doctrine of baptism to its practice.¹ However, while such practical or pastoral complications can be treated as a secondary question with reference to many Christian doctrines, the same is not true of baptism. As with similar matters relating to the Lord's Supper, these complications are central factors in baptism's doctrinal formulation. The particular set of practical complications in the above story includes a significant ecumenical problem concerning the status of infant baptism. Is it a full and complete baptism or, as Karl Barth once put it when thinking about the relation of infant baptism and confirmation, "Is not infant baptism only half a baptism?" (*CD* IV/4, 188; *KD* IV/4, 207). As the above narrative further points out, there are segments of the Christian church—usually descended from the more radical fringe of the Protestant Reformation—that hesitate to grant infant baptism even "half-baptism" status. Although Barth does not go so far as to declare that baptism administered to infants is invalid, thus requiring rebaptism (see *CD* IV/4, 189; *KD* IV/4, 208), it is clear that his most mature treatment is deeply skeptical of the practice on both biblical and theological grounds.

Given the existence both of Christian communities that accept infant baptism and of those who do not, there is an ecumenical problem, the practical complications of which are indicated by the above narrative. The commentary on §12 in the baptismal section of *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* highlights the current ecumenical answer to this problem: baptizing infants and baptizing candidates who have reached a responsible age are treated as "equivalent alternatives."² While this is a relatively uncomplicated position for those who affirm infant baptism to adopt, since churches practicing infant baptism have always also at least provided for the possibility of baptizing older converts, it places those who reject infant baptism in a much more difficult position. Perhaps the most pressing ecumenical burden regarding the doctrine of baptism is the necessity of developing an account of infant baptism that appeals to those

1. See also the harrowing story of Lucille, a woman baptized five times, as told in Laurence Hull Stookey, *Baptism: Christ's Act in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 11–12.

2. *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper No. 111 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 5.

strictly credobaptist churches that find their own theological instincts at odds with the ecumenical desire to recognize baptism in both modes. As George Hunsinger writes during a discussion of Barth's doctrine of baptism, "it would be no small ecumenical gain . . . if all the major traditions, and especially those committed to believer's baptism, could agree that infant baptism is not impermissible. . . . [I]f we could all agree on at least that much, it would be a great advance beyond a point where we are stuck ecumenically right now."³ If such an account of baptism and infant baptism could be advanced, it would make room at the ecumenical table for the insights and contributions of these credobaptist traditions while also bringing the various churches together under the aegis of a significantly more unified baptismal practice.

These are the issues to which I will speak on the basis of Karl Barth's theology. My thesis is twofold. First, I submit that Barth's doctrine of baptism—and specifically, his rejection of infant baptism—has not received a fair hearing. Against those who would dismiss Barth's work on this subject as a departure from his broader theological commitments, I argue that those commitments deeply inform his decisions here. This study's first task is to demonstrate this claim. Chapter 1 serves this end by laying out the development of baptismal theology and practice, with an eye on infant baptism in particular, in order to identify the two major theological arguments offered in favor of infant baptism. These are the sacramental and the covenantal arguments for infant baptism, respectively associated with Augustine and the Reformation. The payoff of identifying these two arguments is twofold. On the one hand, it informs the chapter's later discussion concerning the reception of Barth's work on baptism in general and infant baptism in particular. As that discussion shows, there is a tendency to disregard Barth's criticisms through a reassertion of these two traditional arguments. On the other hand, identifying these two traditional arguments for infant baptism is architecturally significant for structuring the analysis of Barth's doctrine of baptism in chapters 2 and 3, each of which addresses Barth's rejection—implicit and explicit—of one of these traditional arguments.

Chapter 2 takes up Barth's rejection of the sacramental argument for infant baptism. Since this argument depends on a broader soteriological picture, I explicate what I call "traditional sacramental soteriology" in the work of Thomas Aquinas before tracing the ways this soteriological picture both did and did not change as a result of the Reformation. Martin Chemnitz and Zacharias Ursinus provide the reformational counterpoint to Thomas. Importantly, these

3. George Hunsinger, "Baptism and the Soteriology of Forgiveness," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2, no. 3 (2000): 263n19.

thinkers offer an internal modification of the traditional sacramental soteriology rather than undertaking a fundamental departure. Only with Barth's radically objectivist soteriology does such a break occur. Consequently, the sacramental argument for infant baptism is rendered unacceptable for those who find Barth's soteriology compelling. Chapter 3 likewise examines Barth's rejection of the covenantal argument for infant baptism. The Reformed theological tradition is primarily responsible for developing this argument, and Francis Turretin functions here as that tradition's paragon. Looking at the theological consequences of Turretin's infralapsarian doctrine of election, I argue that his theology grants the notion of covenant conceptual superiority over that of election. The reverse is the case for Barth, whose christologically modified supralapsarianism dictates that the notion of covenant is derivative of election. This shift in order ultimately bears fruit in Barth's rejection of the covenantal argument for infant baptism. A unique feature of chapters 2 and 3 is that each concludes with an exegetical excursus that addresses some of the most important biblical texts for the sacramental and covenantal arguments. Such engagement is vital given Barth's commitment to doing theology in deep conversation with scripture.

Chapter 4 moves beyond what Barth rejects in his doctrine of baptism and why he rejects it, to address the positive content of that doctrine. This chapter consequently comprises an extended discussion of *Church Dogmatics* IV/4, especially as it interfaces with other aspects of Barth's mature theology. I also address a number of misreadings of Barth in recent theological literature. The burden of this chapter, however, is to demonstrate that Barth's doctrine of baptism brings together several important aspects of his mature theology. It also provides a subjectivist counterpoint to the soteriological objectivism discussed in chapter 2. Further still, this chapter explicates what Barth means when he calls baptism the "Foundation of the Christian Life," as he puts it in the *Leitsatz* for this paragraph. Chapter 4 thus rounds out in a positive fashion what chapters 2 and 3 explored in a negative fashion, namely, the theological depth and significance of Barth's rejection of infant baptism, and the coherence of that rejection with his broader theological commitments.

My thesis's second task is constructive in character. Whereas Barth himself rejected infant baptism, I argue that such a rejection is not necessary on the basis of his mature theology's broader commitments. As noted in the material on the reception of Barth's baptismal doctrine in chapter 1, this is not a novel idea. More novel is the claim that Barth's mature theology possesses significant resources for deploying a relatively new doctrine of baptism within which infant baptism is a fitting mode of administration. Chapter 5 undertakes to

demonstrate this claim. Therein I reconfigure Barth's doctrine of baptism by allowing his own insights and impulses regarding the Christian life to impact the doctrine of baptism in ways that he did not. Calvin's description of baptism as "the sign of the Gospel" orients my discussion,⁴ which argues for understanding baptism as a form of the gospel proclamation by means of which the church shoulders its missionary vocation. This chapter addresses in due course important issues such as the relation between witness and mediation in Barth's theology, how he understands the relation between divine and human activity, and how to properly conceive of the difference between the baptismal and the instructional modes of the church's gospel proclamation.

What is the payoff to all this? That payoff is a properly evangelical doctrine of baptism in general and of infant baptism in particular. What makes a doctrine properly evangelical? In the most formal sense, such a designation refers to doctrinal positions that are deeply reformational in orientation. Barth himself defined evangelical theology as "that theology which treats of the *God of the Gospel*."⁵ What does it mean for a theological position to be governed by such an attention to the God that is revealed in the gospel (εὐαγγέλιον)? It is the gospel itself that must hold one's attention in doing theology of this character. In the first and constitutive sense, this gospel is that of Jesus Christ (see Mark 1:1), and so a properly evangelical theology will attempt to articulate doctrine with a self-conscious attention to his person and work. In a second and derivative sense, the gospel is something that must be communicated. It is a message that demands missionary proclamation, and so a properly evangelical theology will attempt to articulate doctrine with a self-conscious attention to this vocational demand. This work highlights the role that these evangelical commitments play in Barth's mature theology while also deploying them to produce a doctrine of baptism (specifically, infant baptism) that may well prove attractive to those whose evangelical commitments have—as with Barth himself—pushed them away from recognizing the fittingness of infant baptism as a mode of the church's gospel proclamation.

4. John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. William Pringle, 3 volumes bound in 2 vols., Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 3.383.

5. Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 5, emphasis in the original.