

The History of Baptism

Part 2

by Jack Cottrell

For Christendom's first 1,500 years there was a virtual consensus that baptism is the point of time when God bestows the "double cure" of saving grace (forgiveness and regeneration) upon sinners. (See last week's article.) Why, then, do most Protestants hold a different view, one that passionately separates salvation from baptism? The answer lies in the revolutionary theology of one man, Huldreich Zwingli (1484-1531).

Zwingli was Martin Luther's Swiss counterpart in the European Reformation. Both began their reforming activity around 1520. Though they had the same general goals for changing the existing church, they parted company over the "sacraments" in general and over baptism in particular. While Luther continued to teach the historic view that baptism is a saving work of God, Zwingli rejected this altogether and made it entirely a work of man. Zwingli was quite aware of the innovative nature of his view, declaring that "in this matter of baptism, all the [teachers] have been in error from the time of the apostles" (40).

The Rejection of the Original view

Zwingli developed his new doctrine of baptism in two stages. First, beginning as early as 1523, he deliberately and decisively rejected any connection between baptism and salvation. "Christ himself did not connect salvation with baptism," he said. "The two are not to be connected and used together." "Water-baptism cannot contribute in any way to the washing away of sin" (41). He denied that the water itself has any power to remove the effects of sin from the soul [a view which few had ever held in the first place]; he also denied that God cleanses the soul during baptism, an idea he calls a "vain invention." The general rule is that salvation precedes the baptism that symbolizes it (41,42).

What were Zwingli's reasons for separating salvation from the act of baptism? The main reason was his conviction that the baptism-for-

salvation view contradicts salvation by grace alone through the blood of Christ. Washing away the filth of sin "is the function of the blood of Christ alone" (43). Another reason baptism cannot be for salvation, he said, is that such a view would violate God's sovereignty, i.e., his sovereign freedom to act when and where he chooses (44). Closely connected with this is his idea that the real cause of any individual's salvation is God's sovereign, eternal, unconditional election (predestination) of that person. It is election that saves, not baptism, and not even faith (45).

In my judgment one of Zwingli's strongest reasons for rejecting the historic view of baptism was his incipient philosophical dualism, i.e., his sense of a strong antithesis between matter and spirit, between body and soul. He saw spirit and matter as openly hostile to each other. "Divinity, spirit, the superior nature" stands in direct opposition to dull, dark, inactive, rebellious earth (65). This carries over into the dual nature of man. While the soul can be regarded as "flowing forth from the Godhead itself" and as possessing a nearly divine essence, the body is just a "dull mass," a "lump of muddy earth" (65, 66). How, then, can water baptism have anything to do with the salvation of the soul? A physical substance (water) simply cannot have any connection with a spiritual effect: "Material water cannot contribute in any way to the cleansing of the soul" (43).

The conclusion is that baptism is not necessary for salvation, neither as its cause nor as its occasion. Zwingli clearly affirms that faith alone is necessary for salvation: "Christ himself did not connect salvation with baptism: it is always by faith alone." "The one necessary thing which saves those of us who hear the Gospel is faith." "Faith is the only thing through which we are blessed." "We are saved by faith only." If we say baptism takes away sins, that is just a figure of speech; for it is not baptism that takes them away, but faith (45).

What does Zwingli do with all the New Testament texts that seem to clearly connect baptism with salvation? He dismisses them entirely by two devices. One, many are mere figures of speech, such as metonymy, in which the name of the sign is transferred to the thing signified. He

applies this to texts such as Ephesians 5:26; Romans 6:3,4; Galatians 3:27; and Titus 3:5. Two, some texts refer to water baptism, but others refer to Holy Spirit baptism, which is sovereignly administered by God whenever he chooses. Only the later is necessary for salvation (46,47).

The second stage of the development of Zwingli's new doctrine of baptism was his careful construction of a completely new purpose or meaning for the act. This was accomplished mainly between 1523 and 1525. In this period his most pressing need was to provide a rationale for infant baptism. Since the third century, infants had been baptized for the removal of original sin. But if baptism has no connection with the taking away of sin, there is no longer any reason to baptize infants. But for certain reasons Zwingli decided that infant baptism must be maintained; thus he had to come up with a new purpose for it.

Creating Covenant Theology

The results of Zwingli's quest were truly revolutionary. In order to justify anew infant baptism, he laid the foundation for a whole new hermeneutical approach to the Bible, usually known as covenant theology. In summary, he rejected the traditional distinction between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, and introduced that ever since (at least) Abraham there has been just one covenant of grace. What we call the "new" covenant is actually the same covenant God made with Abraham. The Mosaic covenant was merely a secondary, temporary expedient; when it was set aside the Abrahamic covenant continued on and still continues on today. The church today is under the covenant God made with Abraham. This is the concept of covenant unity (50,51).

If there has been just one covenant since the days of Abraham, then there has also been just one covenant people since that time. The Israelites of old and the Christians of today are all part of the same body, the same church (51).

Most significantly, if there is just one covenant and one covenant people, then there is also just one covenant sign. Based on this reasoning, Zwingli totally equated the meaning of baptism in the New Testament

with the meaning of Old Testament circumcision' each is simply a sign of membership in the one covenant people (51, 52).

Here, then, is Zwingli's trilogy: one covenant, one covenant people, and one covenant sign. This new set of ideas is the basis for the usual Protestant doctrine of baptism. It is the reason many Protestant churches "baptize" infants, and it is the foundation of the commonly accepted Protestant faith-only approach to the baptism of adults.

Baptism Reexamined

According to this Zwinglian view, exactly what is the function of baptism in the experience of a Christian covert? Exactly what is happening during the moment of baptism? Two things. First, baptism is the baptized person's pledge of allegiance to the Christian community, an outward sign of his inward commitment to live the Christian life. Zwingli actually drew this aspect of baptism's meaning not from Old Testament circumcision but from the meaning of the Latin word *sacramentum*, meaning "a pledge, an oath." Herein arose the whole idea of baptism as a public testimony or witness. Everything baptism signifies has already happened; baptism is the means by which one makes it known to other Christians. It is thus done not for the sake of the one baptized, but for those in the audience (57-59).

Second, baptism is the baptized person's sign of belonging to the covenant people. Thus it performs the exact same function as circumcision in the Old Testament era. This assumed Old Testament connection is the reason baptism is called a "covenant sign" or "the sign of the covenant." (These terms make sense only on Zwinglian presuppositions.) Just as circumcision signified that one was already a member of the covenant people (by birth), so does baptism signify that one has already been saved and is already a member of the church (60,61).

This view was taken over by John Calvin, and most Protestants have adopted it in one form or another.

The Big Picture

In conclusion, regarding the meaning of baptism, the contrast between the first 1,500 years of Christian history and the history of Protestantism since Zwingli could not be more severe. In its original form baptism was clearly seen as a work of God, as the time when God himself was bestowing salvation. But since Zwingli, baptism has been seen almost exclusively as a work of man; in baptism one gives testimony, bears witness to his faith, expresses his faith, commits or pledges himself to live as a Christian, lets the world know he is a Christian. These are all acts of me, not acts of God.

What is most significant is that Zwingli formulated his new doctrine of baptism by ignoring the New Testament's own teaching and by drawing his new view from two non-New Testament sources: the meaning of Latin word (*sacramentum*) and the meaning of Old Testament circumcision. I challenge anyone to find anywhere in the New Testament itself any justification whatsoever for this new Zwinglian view. I cannot understand why so many of our preachers and people want to abandon the original view of baptism and align themselves with the innovator Zwingli and his modern followers. "Let God be found true, though every man be found a liar" (Romans 3:4, New American Standard Bible).

End Notes:

1 All page numbers in this article are references to my essay, "Baptism According to the Reformed Tradition," in *Baptism and the Remission of Sins: An Historical Perspective*, edited by David Fletcher (Joplin: College Press, 1990), 39-81. There one may find all the original documentation and bibliographical information for quotations from Zwingli's writings.

2 See my book, *Baptism: A Biblical Study* (Joplin: College Press, 1989), 153-163, for a refutation of the idea that *eperotema* in 1 Peter 3:21 means "pledge," contra to the New International Version.