

Should Evangelical Churches Re-baptize Roman Catholics? An Irenic Proposal

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A 19th-Century Issue Resurfaces

When this question was debated in the 19th century, Protestant America had been set on edge by waves of European Catholic immigrants to the cities of the Atlantic seaboard. Until 1840, outside of regions such as Maryland and Louisiana, many American Protestants had little or no direct contact with Roman Catholics; this rapidly changed with the influx of Irish and European immigrants. The rapidly-altering demographic stirred strong feelings in the political world where opposition to this kind of immigration gained a considerable following. A new political party supported by a secretive organization, known as the “Know Nothings” fed on these concerns. These developments – first in immigration and consequently in society – required American Protestant leaders to take up a vexing question, occasioned by the fact that some of the immigrants were curious to know what welcome they might find in Protestant churches: “On what terms might persons who had been baptized, reared, catechized and confirmed into Roman Catholicism be received into Protestant churches?”¹

Today we return to this question because of three profound demographic shifts: a) Within Latin America itself, a massive turn by nominally Catholic adherents to evangelical and charismatic Protestantism is in progress with no prospect of abatement. This means that the existing evangelical Protestant church in Latin America is faced with this question before we are within North America.² b) Catholic *immigration* to North America (now from Cen-

¹ The debate and the irenic response of one evangelical theologian to it is described in Andrew Hoffercker, *Charles Hodge: The Pride of Princeton* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishers, 2011), chap. 5.

² This flood of nominal Catholics into Latin America’s evangelical and charismatic Protestant churches is reported by Mark Hutchinson and John Wolffe (*A Short History of Global Evangelicalism* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012], 233)

tral and South America, as well as the Pacific Rim)³ and c) a Catholic *migration* including (but not confined to) these immigrants, into our churches. In cities such as Houston, Chicago, Atlanta and Vancouver, former Catholics now associate themselves by the thousands with evangelical Protestant churches.⁴ These new allegiances involve vastly more people than the often-publicized reverse process: the “going home to Rome” phenomenon.⁵ The crux of the question is: “Should re-affiliated Roman Catholics be required to be re-baptized?” How one resolves this issue is determined by the way one answers collateral questions.

Two Underlying Questions to Be Faced

#1. What place does baptism occupy on our theological landscape? Few evangelical Christians will want to insist that it is a primary doctrine as is the divinity of the man, Jesus of Nazareth (1 John 5.1), the existence of God in three persons (2 Cor. 13.14), or the principle that salvation is received by appropriating faith (John 1.12). Baptism is more often considered as belonging to a second rank of doctrines. We do not mean to denigrate baptism, but only to acknowledge that since salvation comes by hearing with faith (Rom. 10.17, Gal. 3.2) it is conceivable both to pass from this world in a state of salvation without it (Luke 23.43) and, conversely, to receive baptism and still be unrenewed (Acts 8.22,23). While baptism is obligatory for those who would be called Christians (Acts 2.38), we cannot demonstrate conclusively that every believer in the N.T. period had been baptized. When Paul can recall baptizing only a handful of the Corinthian believers (from a group large enough to sub-divide itself four ways!), we are left to wonder who (if not Paul) baptized the remainder. Evidently, baptizing was not the highest of

to have reached 8,000 to 10,000 persons per day. Confirmation of this trend has been highlighted with reference to a single Latin American country, Brazil, in connection with the 2013 papal visit. The American public television network, PBS, reported that since 1980, the proportion of Brazilians recording their religious affiliation as Roman Catholic has declined from almost 90% to almost 60%, and yet *without* this being indicative of a secularizing trend. That proportion of the population is now increasingly reporting itself as Protestant. http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/religion/july-dec13/pope_07-24.html, accessed 26 July, 2013.

³ Some Latin American and Pacific Rim Roman Catholicism has in recent times taken “evangelical” forms with an emphasis on conversion, striking answers to prayer and the personal indwelling of the Holy Spirit. When immigrants familiar with this form of Roman Catholicism cannot locate it in the new culture they enter, it becomes apparent that the evangelical emphasis they desire is readily available from other churches.

⁴ See the striking description of this influx into American culture provided in Elizabeth Dias, “The Latino Reformation”, *Time*, April 15, 2013.

⁵ Evidence that the flow of ex-Roman Catholics into evangelical Protestantism far exceeds the flow of evangelical Protestants towards Roman Catholicism is supplied by Scot McKnight and Hauna Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), chap. 3.

Paul's priorities (1 Cor. 1.13-17).⁶ Baptism is important, but not of preeminent importance (1 Cor. 15.3-5). Differences of Christian conviction about baptism are both the symptom and the outworking of its having this secondary status.

#2. A second question is that of what determines whether any particular instance of baptism ought to be reckoned as valid. Here, there are four factors to be considered.

First, the most common criterion as to a baptism's validity is the question of whether it has been administered in the name of the Trinity (Matt. 28.19), or to put it differently – in the name of Jesus (Acts 8.16; Gal. 3.22). Yet, if applied all by itself, this approach would only invalidate baptisms administered by non-Trinitarians (such as Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons) and leave us just about where we began. The baptisms in question were administered in the name of the Triune God.

Second, some will insist that a further test of baptismal validity is that of *mode*, i.e. the question of whether a baptism was administered by immersion, pouring or sprinkling (with the latter two regarded with suspicion by proponents of the first). Yet, if we grant the primary importance of the Trinitarian test (above), it is wise for us to consider that the mode of baptism is at most able to render a particular baptism (which has been administered in the name of the Trinity) "irregular" as distinguished from "regular". This charitable conclusion will follow if – while granting that the majority of N.T. baptisms were associated with sources of water which made immersion or pouring *possible* – we *also* take on board the fact that not all N.T. accounts imply or require this mode (e.g. Acts 2:41; 9.18; 10.45; 16.33). Even if we should allow that immersion was the prevailing or even preferred mode in the Apostolic and post-Apostolic church, it is still evident that variations on immersion were rapidly introduced to accommodate unforeseen circumstances.⁷ Climate was one such a factor, and requests for baptism from the sick and dying was another. Immersionists should be aware that this ancient variation is reflected even in various streams of the Anabaptist and Baptist movements. Thus, Trinitarian baptisms, even if carried out in what might be considered by some to be an "irregular" mode, ought to be accepted as valid. (Please note that this charitable assessment places those who kindly make it under no obligation to themselves employ any practice which they consider to be irregular).

Third, a credobaptist (one who insists that profession must precede baptism) will be saying "hold on!" Accepting Trinitarian baptism, even if conducted in different modes, is one thing; but wouldn't such an approach oblige

⁶ C. K. Barrett, *Church, Ministry and Sacraments in the New Testament: The Didsbury Lectures* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), chap. 3.

⁷ See the early 2nd-century *Didache* chap. 7 for illustration of this. I have consulted this in Cyril Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 161-182.

one to accept infant baptism as valid too? Doing that would draw the credobaptist not just into an “irregularity” of practice but into what he would consider “error”. There may not in fact be any elbow room for the credobaptist on this question; yet consider this.

Evangelical ordinances/ sacraments function at two levels. At one level, when accompanied by the Word, they *display* the blessings of Christ and the gospel which are meant to be appropriated by faith. As surely as clean water cleanses from pollution, so the sacrifice of Christ for us – received in faith – cleanses us from sin. Infant baptism serves this “display” purpose quite adequately. At a second level, evangelical ordinances/sacraments *confirm* the blessings of the gospel to those who receive them in faith. In this second sense (of confirming), it needs to be acknowledged that baptism, applied to the infant, functions “prospectively” (i.e. with an eye to future developments). Baptism administered to the infant can function in this confirming way as and when the young one trusts the Saviour. Then, and not before baptism confirms and seals.

Is it not conceivable that a charitable credobaptist will be able to bring himself to recognize the validity of an “irregular” infant baptism, administered under Catholic auspices, *considered as a display of gospel promises*? Of course, he would also insist that it was not valid *considered as a confirmation or seal* because that benefit is dependent on a still-future appropriation of Christ by faith. However, in taking such a cautious stance, the conscientious credobaptist occupies nearly identical ground as does the evangelical paedobaptist who is also looking for that individual, previously baptized under Catholic auspices, to make a credible profession of faith in Christ. In taking such a view, the paedobaptist would reckon that the baptism the Catholic originally received as “sign” or “display” has also, at that time, become a “confirmation” or “seal”. The difference between credobaptist and paedobaptist approaches is, on this understanding, quite limited.

But fourth, someone will say, “But surely baptisms can also be reckoned invalid because of their association with doctrines or practices we reckon to be flawed?” This seems to be a sticking point for many evangelical Protestants who – even if otherwise inclined toward a policy of baptismal “generosity” – balk at accepting as valid baptisms associated with ideas of sacramental regeneration, of the automatic removal of original sin, or the granting of “initial justification”. We should be honest and admit that it is not only over Roman Catholic doctrines that we face this problem. Liberal Protestant ministers administering baptism to infants are quite capable of sowing confusions of their own. Especially if they lean towards views of universal salvation, they will in all likelihood use the occasion of baptizing an infant to communicate the idea that every baptized child is already in a state of grace.

Beyond such doctrinal questions, there is a range of issues raised by Roman Catholic clergy scandals of various kinds. Many will wonder, “How could such priests or ministers possibly conduct baptism in an acceptable

way?” Yet in honesty we will need to admit that hardly any denomination has been exempt from some such scandals, at one time or another. Thus, if we assert that baptism can be invalidated because of errors of doctrine and life which have appeared in the Trinitarian churches which have administered it, we paint ourselves into a corner. Our dilemma becomes this: “Whose sensitivities on such matters – yours? mine? someone else’s? – will be determinative in deciding which baptisms are valid?” Here again, a spirit of generosity provides the best way forward. And this is so in light of a final relevant question, which is . . .

Whose Ceremony is Baptism?

This is the supreme question. If we are right on this, we will be right on the larger issue too. In quite a different context in which one “branch” of the church (the Donatist) had assailed the validity of the baptisms of the older church from which it stood apart, Augustine (354-430) insisted:

in the matter of baptism, we have to consider not who he is that gives (i.e. administers) it, but what it is that he gives; not who he is that receives, but what it is that he receives...When baptism is administered in the words of the gospel, however great be the perverseness of the minister or recipient, the sacrament itself is holy on his account whose the sacrament is⁸

Seen in this light, “irregular” baptisms, if administered in the name of the Trinity, *are* valid. It is a good thing! Consider how many of our baptisms could be deemed “irregular”. If an “ideal” baptism would be considered to be the one in which the moment of believing corresponds perfectly in time with the moment when baptism is administered (the two being halves of one whole), then not many of our spiritual biographies perfectly match this “ideal”. Yet, we have accommodated ourselves both to considerable lapses of time between believing and being baptized (the case among credobaptists) and accustomed ourselves to similar lapses of time between being baptized and believing (the case among paedobaptists). As a result, our spiritual autobiographies very often *only approximate* what we recognize to be the baptismal “ideal”.⁹

Nevertheless, remember that these two evangelical understandings of baptism do succeed in preserving the importance of both believing in Jesus Christ and being baptized. In the end, since baptism belongs to Jesus Christ

⁸ Augustine, *On Baptism* IV.16.18.

⁹ J. I. Packer, writing in *I Want to be a Christian* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1994) republished as *Growing in Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007) II.10, draws from this practical reality of baptism and conversion hardly ever coinciding, that we must treat the order in which they occur as much less important than that they both have occurred.

who received it (Matt. 3.13-17) and who authorized that it be administered (Matt. 28.19, 20), since the Church Jesus founded affirms but “one baptism” (Eph. 4.5); and since our own personal spiritual biographies regarding Christ and baptism are not uniform, we ought to extend the charity we already grant to one another to persons who received Catholic baptism in infancy. When they give credible profession of faith in Christ, we should welcome them unreservedly into our churches.¹⁰

¹⁰ Two resources in particular help to sketch out some of the flexibilities which are possible for us as we wrestle with these questions. First is the volume edited by the late David Wright, *Baptism: Three Views* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009). Second is the elaboration of the approach of Pastor John Piper, now retired as senior pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis accessible here: http://cdn.desiringgod.org/pdf/baptism_and_membership/QuestionsAndAnswers.pdf. It is this writer’s understanding that this approach, which enshrines believers’ baptism by immersion as the only water baptism on offer with a flexibility as to receiving persons baptized by other modes into church membership, has not been endorsed. It remains however an illustration of the irenic and charitable approach commended here.