



# CROSSING THE LINE

*Where Baptism Divides Us*

by Caleb Kurbis

# Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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*“Death, you cannot end my gladness; I am baptized into Christ!  
When I die, I leave all sadness to inherit paradise!  
Though I lie in dust and ashes  
Faith’s assurance brightly flashes:  
Baptism has the strength divine to make life immortal mine”<sup>2</sup>*

A secret meeting was held in a remote part of Kenya. Nik Ripkin, a Christian missionary in Somalia, was one of two Westerners invited to this meeting with several other missionaries who worked in the Muslim world. He met Pastor H, a missionary from Iran who began to speak openly about some of the real and present dangers. Some tried to encourage him to turn down his transparency, but he felt safe. Others followed suit with forthcoming details of their own.

Two weeks after Ripkin returned to Somalia, he learned that Pastor H had disappeared. Reports from fellow believers in Iran stated that he was probably taken by security police. Historically this was how the Iranian government carried out its persecution against Christians. How do Muslims usually determine who has crossed the line? Ripkin writes:

If (converts) are discovered reading the Bible, they can claim they are studying it in order to debate Christians more intelligently. If they’re seen sneaking into a church building, they can excuse such behavior in the same way. If seen talking to a pastor or some Western Christian, seekers can suggest that they were simply observed witnessing, lifting up the attributes of Islam. But they can’t explain away baptism — there is no acceptable excuse.

Muslims believe that at baptism, a person no longer belongs to Islam but to Christianity.... At baptism, persecution soars because identification with Jesus is real, irrevocable, and forever. Baptism is the point of no return.<sup>3</sup>

Two weeks after his disappearance the fears surrounding Pastor H became a reality. A friend and fellow pastor of Pastor H was filling in. Approximately 38 men and women from a Muslim background presented themselves for baptism. The church was packed. The preacher was standing in the baptismal pool having just finished his message. Just then, Pastor H’s wife walked forward with tears in her eyes, handing the phone to this pastor friend who was filling in. The pastor lifted the phone to his ear and heard, “Pastor H is dead.” The voice on the other end of that call shared that he saw Pastor H’s body taken from the back of a truck. His lifeless body, obviously tortured, was buried in an unmarked grave.

The pastor standing in the baptismal pool hung up the phone. Turning to the 38 who witnessed a realistic cost of following Christ, he said, “Are you ready to be baptized? Your pastor has been

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<sup>1</sup>The artwork on the front is by Jason Jaspersen. [www.jjjaspersen.com](http://www.jjjaspersen.com).

<sup>2</sup>Erdmann Neumeister, *“God’s Own Child I Gladly Say It”* 1671-1756; tr. Robert E. Voelker, b. 1957, Christian Worship Supplement #737

<sup>3</sup>This story was taken from an article written by Nik Ripkin who recaptured and reproduced the details through eyewitnesses. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2019/april/baptism-point-of-no-return-story-somalia-persecution.html>

killed. Are you ready to be buried with Christ in baptism and raised to new life in him?" Down the aisle stood all 38. One after the other, they were baptized. The line was crossed.

Our current mission fields don't contain the threat of torture and martyrdom. If we end up in an unmarked grave, it's more likely that we failed to watch our step before a committal than that we fell into the hands of Muslim madmen. The last time Christians were killed in the West because they crossed the line through baptism wasn't from outside the Christian church but within, as thousands of Anabaptists were killed after the movement began in the 1520's.<sup>4</sup> Although less hostile today, does baptism remain that line in the sand?

For Muslims who persecute Christians, baptism is the line. So many other actions can be excused. Not baptism. For various Christians today, baptism is still a line, but for different reasons. Instead of seeing it as a line that shouldn't be crossed at all, it is a very visible matter that leads us to ask what other Christians believe, why and how baptism is carried out, and who can be baptized? The differences are inevitably divisive.<sup>5</sup>

After SEC football and politics, baptism specifically, and not just religion in general, can be one of the most divisive topics among Christians, especially in the South. Whether with good intentions or knee-jerk reaction, baptism still is a line that divides, or at least is perceived to divide, many Christians. There are countless reasons why that is our reality, some of which we will explore later on. For now, I believe there are four reasons why this subject seems to carry such weight.

- 1) Baptism will inevitably be handled with a lot of variety with the number of denominations and the amount of history behind each.
- 2) Christians rarely have meaningful conversations with Christians from different frameworks.
- 3) Baptism is a very personal matter, and personal matters are dealt with personally.
- 4) Baptism is an outward matter that points back to and flows from a lot of other theological baggage. It is often *the* litmus test for major denominational differences.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Georg Blaurock, Conrad Grebel, and Felix Manz were all re-baptized in Manz's mother's house in Zurich Switzerland on January 21, 1525, launching the Anabaptist movement. The Zurich council had just forbidden them from disseminating their views. In addition to their hard stance against the Church-State they denied the legitimacy of infant baptism. Their actions and those who dealt with them were brutish. One might also recall the Zwickau Prophets led by Thomas Müntzer. Some suggest that the persecution only aided their cause. Concerning the burning at the stake of an Anabaptist by the name of Bathasar Hubmaier, Martin Luther noted, "By fire we accomplish little" (*Luther's Works*, Vol. 40, pg. 230).

<sup>5</sup> When speaking of entering into God's invisible kingdom we don't typically use a spatial analogy, although the sheep pen (Jn. 10:16), the vine (Jn. 15), the narrow way (Mt. 7:13-14), and the kingdom (Php. 3:20) might be related. Nevertheless, if you would humor me, the phrase "crossing the line" connotes not just a defining moment visible to others, but also a relatively controversial edge to that matter. That baptism is a crossing the line from unbelief to self-professed faith, as in the case of those 38 in Iran, is not the point. That baptism is the very outward and divisive matter for those persecuting Christians from outside the Church and even those divided over this matter inside the Church is the point of the analogy.

<sup>6</sup> Even for those who think that baptism isn't a "major doctrine" and that it should divide, note how popular theologians like Wayne Grudem still can't get around the fact that it still divides: "Baptism is not a 'major' doctrine that should be the basis of division among genuine Christians, but it is nonetheless a matter of importance for ordinary church life, and it is appropriate that we give it full consideration" (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pg. 967). Note that in his very next words he stakes his claim on a particular position ("Baptistic").

The assignment for this paper was to interview pastors from other Christian denominations concerning baptism for the purpose of better understanding other frameworks according to their own words, to identify and/or eliminate caricatures where they exist, and to aid our understanding for clearer communication of this dear doctrine. There will be plenty that won't surprise you.<sup>7</sup> However, I pray that hearing from the "horses' mouths" will give you a better understanding of how and why these pastors and churches function the way that they do. This paper will define what comes before the subject of baptism, how other pastors approach it, and, finally, how and where we can leverage baptism for our good and for the good of the people we are privileged to serve.

## Part I: Where's the Line?

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*"You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means." ~ Inigo Montoya<sup>8</sup>*

We don't know the origin of the phrase, *crossing the line*. Does come from tennis or cricket? Does come from a plow horse cutting the boundary line between properties? Does come from two prize fighters squaring off? Regardless of your preference, the general idea is the same. Crossing the line doesn't just identify where someone is going but also where they came from. Are we sure that the words we are using and the words that other Christians are using come from the same place and mean the same thing? What do we mean?

Describing baptism as crossing the line is helpful or not depending on what a person believes about God's place in baptism. With God as subject, this *crossing the line* analogy is not original to me. God drew a clear line with the water of the flood (2 Pt. 3:18ff), as well as in the Red Sea that drowned Pharaoh's army and his chariots (Ex. 15). These prefigured what God would accomplish in the waters of holy baptism. Our Savior Jesus sanctified baptism and instituted it for us in his entering the Jordan in order that he would bring us from sin and death to forgiveness and life eternal.<sup>9</sup> In baptism many lines are crossed: Jesus to us, we to him, self to grave, death to life, sin to forgiveness, unbelief to faith, to mention a few. Baptism is where grace becomes personal. It's where the cross and the empty tomb become ours. We draw a very clear line when we ask and then answer these questions about the blessings and power of baptism with Luther in his Small Catechism: "What does baptism do for us?" "How can water do such great things?"

And so, when we speak of baptism, we know that we mean something completely different than what many other Christians mean.<sup>10</sup> Is it an act of obedience? Is it proof that the person is a believer?

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Irony much? Also note that he references the first chapter in which he makes a distinction between "minor" versus "major" doctrines. God never provides such designations/qualifications in his Word.

<sup>7</sup> For all "No, duh!" material, thank the conference planning committee and/or your astute knowledge and/or my simple mindedness. ("No way! Baptists still don't baptize babies?! Brand new information!")

<sup>8</sup> "The Princess Bride," 1987.

<sup>9</sup> This language is taken from Martin Luther's Flood Prayer. *Christian Worship: Occasional Services*. Holy Baptism II.

<sup>10</sup> It probably merits noting that everyone I interviewed believes exactly what we believe about God's Word, namely, that it's the inspired and inerrant Word of God. The gospel is the power of God for salvation. They all agreed that they Holy Spirit uses the Word to create faith. Concerning Christology, we are on the same page almost entirely. There are most likely some differences elsewhere, e.g. eschatologically. I didn't touch that subject with a 29.5-foot pole.

Is it a connection to a Christian family or congregation? Is God involved completely, partly, or not at all? One Christian talking to another about baptism can be about as communicative as speaking French to a man who only knows Swahili.<sup>11</sup>

For the sake of clarity, we can't paint with a broad brush when we use labels like *Reformed, Evangelicals, Arminian, Baptists, Presbyterians, Calvinists, Protestants*, and especially *Lutheran*. Not all Baptists are Arminian and not all Presbyterians are Reformed. Therefore, I'll do my best to identify each of the three different frameworks when it comes to baptism: sacrificial (obedience), partial, and sacramental.<sup>12</sup>

There are those who view baptism as something we do for God (sacrifice/act of obedience). To them, baptism has nothing to do with the saving work of God. Rather, it's the proof that the newly professing Christian is a believer. To put it another way, it's the outward evidence of an inward working.<sup>13</sup> We commonly illustrate this view with an upward arrow from us to God. And so, it's perfectly logical in this framework that baptism isn't for infants because, to them, baptism is based on outward obedience to God.

There are those who view baptism as providing some benefit to the recipient (partial). At first glance or hearing, it can look and sound Lutheran. "Baptism is efficacious; divine grace is 'really ... conferred, by the Holy Ghost' through baptism."<sup>14</sup> Yet, so much depends on someone or something else. It could be an understanding of the term "covenant" and the emphasis put on the recipient's family and church. It could be a tradition from medieval times. They acknowledge that God is at work, but it's not complete. There is a partial working in man, hence the arrows in both directions.

Then there is the sacramental understanding, at least as we understand and use that term. As explained on the previous page, God in his grace has saved us through Christ and has chosen to work through the Word. We are dead by nature, with nothing to offer God (Ro. 8:7). Therefore, the Holy Spirit creates and strengthens faith. And the Spirit has chosen to work through the Word which is powerful to redeem, regenerate, and save (Ro. 1:16; 10:17). Bring that word to simple elements – water or bread and wine – and the Holy Spirit does his work (Jn. 3:3ff; Ti. 3:5; Eph. 5:25-27). "Not by my own thinking or choosing" or doing or serving or growing or knowing or hoping that my Christian family will (fill in the blank) or proving that I'm saved to myself or others or whatever else.

God



God



God



<sup>11</sup> For example, James Emery White recently posted in his blog "Church and Culture" which baptisms don't count. We wouldn't speak that way, because his definition of baptism and the premise behind it are completely different than our use of baptism. <https://www.churchandculture.org/blog/2019/9/12/when-baptisms-dont-count>

<sup>12</sup> The outline aims to best and in the simplest way cover the main differences based on my reading and interviews. I have also found the papers of Pastor John Bortulin and Pastor John Vieths very helpful. For a better treatment of comparative details, see those. They are referenced in the bibliography. For this paper, I tried my best to stick to the interviews in keeping with the assignment.

<sup>13</sup> Four of the five Baptist pastors that I interviewed use this exact phrase.

<sup>14</sup> Pratt, *Understanding Four Views of Baptism*, pg. 63. Note that, as seen by Pratt in this book, he and many Reformed refer to baptism and the Lord's Supper as sacraments. Yet, by their definitions of each and the blessings present or absent, their use of the word "sacrament" and ours are not the same.

Each framework has specific answers to these defining questions: “Who creates and preserves faith?” and “How do those blessings get powerfully communicated?”<sup>15</sup> And where they see the Spirit’s power through the Word, or not, is in direct correlation with where they draw that line. Baptism is a line to be crossed later on (sacrifice), sooner or later depending (partial), or it’s the starting line right in front of a Spiritless corpse (sacramental). The way one answers those defining questions determines where the line of baptism is drawn.

## Part II: Whose Line Is It, Anyway?

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“What are you?” ... “I’m Batman.” ~ *Batman*<sup>16</sup>

Ask someone about baptism and we learn a lot about all of their theology. It’s a way of asking “What are you?” without being so abrupt or naïve. That discovery worked both ways in each of my discussions. In one particular conversation a Reformed Baptist pastor asked, “So, Lutheran... what exactly is that?” He continued, “You guys don’t baptize babies, do you?” I said, “We sure do. Can I tell you why?” He said, “So, you’re on that side. Please do.”

The topic of infant baptism is certainly huge in these discussions. However, with each conversation, I hope to highlight who they are and what they believe which obviously determines where the line of baptism is drawn.

### *Roman Catholic Church*

There is a Catholic church within ten minutes of our Asheville location. There are a few others 20-30 minutes away. I spoke briefly with one of the priests. He directed me to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and said, “I’m sure you know that it’s all there.” I dug into that as well as the Council of Trent, Rome’s response to Lutherans poking holes in their medieval sacramental system. Nothing has changed.

Although they have the essence of baptism – water and the Trinitarian formula (the Word) – they do not view baptism as the means by which a child is washed of all sin. Their understanding of concupiscence, not actual sin but the tendency to commit it, leaves much to be achieved by the baptized.<sup>17</sup> Our Lutheran Confessions are clear on this matter:

Our adversaries know in what sense Luther intended this remark that original sin remains after baptism. Luther always writes that baptism removes the guilt of original sin. However, the *material*, as they call it, of the sin (concupiscence) remains. He also adds that the Holy Spirit, given through baptism, begins to put to death the concupiscence and begins to create

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<sup>15</sup> These defining questions are not original to me. Prof. A. Koelpin pointed out the struggle that Luther and others had against Rome and the radical Reformers. Luther even stated that infant baptism would be lost without a proper understanding of *fides infusa* and *fides aliena*. Koelpin, “The Challenge of Anabaptist Baptism and the Lutheran Confession” pgs. 9-10. Vid. et *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 48, pgs. 364-372.

<sup>16</sup> “Batman” 1989. Yes, Michael Keaton was the best Batman. Val Kilmer was the worst. No, it’s not up for debate.

<sup>17</sup> “Yet certain temporal consequences of sin remain in the baptized, such as suffering, illness, death, and such frailties inherent in life as weaknesses of character, and so on, as well as an inclination to sin that Tradition calls *concupiscence*, or metaphorically, “the tinder for sin” (*fomes peccati*); since concupiscence “is left for us to wrestle with, it cannot harm those who do not consent but manfully resist it by the grace of Jesus Christ.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, page 322, par. 1264.



new movements within a person. Augustine speaks in the same way when he says, “Sin is forgiven in baptism, not in such a way that it no longer exists, but so that it is not charged.”<sup>18</sup>

Most dangerously, Catholics view baptism as the moment when infants are infused with grace to work out their own salvation. Of course, this is still an attack on the foundation of our Christian faith, namely, that we are saved by faith alone, apart from works, by grace alone – declared right in God’s sight on account of Christ’s redemptive work alone (Ro. 4:25; 2 Cor. 5:21). And this “not guilty” verdict is communicated to us by the Spirit’s work in our baptism. Yet such unilateral saving is called into question when “grace” is the beginning of a process of works righteousness.

Furthermore, the Catholic Church still maintains that it owns the rights on all things truly Christian and eternal. Simply performing the motions of baptism brings blessings by the Holy Spirit, even without faith in the believer.<sup>19</sup> Thus, as a child grows, they would need to profess and even prove their faith later on. Much responsibility is placed on the family, sponsors, and the church to make sure that this child remains a believer. If the child doesn’t develop their faith, baptism does nothing for them.<sup>20</sup> Catholics stress infant baptism as a baptism into the arms of the Church Catholic. It’s no wonder that they refuse to recognize an otherwise legitimate baptism.

On a practical note, you undoubtedly have members like mine who lament the pressures from Catholic family members. As parents they are facing pressure from their Catholic parents concerning the baptism of their children. (Not to mention weddings.) At the heart of such strife and doubts are lies from the deceiver who loves to throw obstacles in between sinners and their Savior’s grace (Jn. 8:42-45). Thankfully, we have the power of the Word for our dispensing. “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, cleansing her with the washing with water through the Word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph. 5:25-27).

Nothing has changed since medieval times. I suppose if I could have had a conversation I might have received a formal decree that I am anathema. That would be worthy of a frame on the wall.

ELCA

(\*sigh\*)

The nearest ELCA church is a few minutes south of our Asheville location. There are three others, each 30 minutes to the north, east, and south. What I have heard is that these congregations do something different than the adopted doctrines of this “church.” Although I have several anecdotes, it’s not surprising to any of us that the local pastors twist the latest developments however it may work for them.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Apology to the Augsburg Confession: Article II (I) Original Sin, par. 35-36, pg. 80. *Concordia, The Lutheran Confessions*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ex opera operato* – “for the sake of the work performed.”

<sup>20</sup> It shouldn’t surprise any of us that the egocentric, works-based *opinio legis* shows itself in many ways, even making Catholics sound like Baptists, and vice versa. More on this later.

<sup>21</sup> For example, I have some members who left the ELCA church in 2010 on account of the church-wide vote to ordain openly practicing gay men and women. In an effort to try and retain them the pastor said, “Don’t worry. It won’t happen here.” Not more than a year later it did.

Out of respect for the assignment of this paper, I did talk with a defunct ELCA minister. He describes his experience in ministry as a joy “until the ELCA started going to hell in a handbasket.” He confirmed my two general assumptions: a) the practice of baptism is generally going to remain the same as ours in most places, especially in the South; and b) the previous generality is losing ground because of the slippery slope they have been on for years on how they view and handle the Word.

Consider the latest development this past August, when they formally adopted a new policy in their recent church-wide assembly: “A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment.”<sup>22</sup> This policy opens their “church” to all different faiths and renounces Jesus Christ as the only Savior from sin and for eternity. There have been many times in the recent past when we have wondered if we would get to a place where we doubt the validity of their sacraments.<sup>23</sup> We’ve arrived. Practically, what does this mean?

At both of our locations, we are experiencing several visiting families who are leaving or are considering leaving the ELCA. And when people do join our church from the ELCA, I don’t assume that we should declare their use of the sacraments entirely illegitimate. We can say that God gave his Word to carry the meaning of those words. The mere sounds and syllables of the Word are not the essence of the Word. So long as the words don’t start to mean something else, the sacraments won’t be lost in this “church.”<sup>24</sup> Is it possible that we might face Christians from the ELCA and traditions

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<sup>22</sup> You probably know that the ELCA’s leaning away from Jesus as the only Savior is nothing new. They have been working on universalistic leanings since 1989 if not earlier. The adoption of this policy affirms that, although there are many Christian’s within the ELCA, they aren’t a Christian church by this policy and others. [https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Inter-Religious\\_Policy\\_Statement.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Inter-Religious_Policy_Statement.pdf). You can watch the bad get terribly worse in this video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e9nw4GVTPaI>. Watch especially at the 1:21 mark where a delegate’s motion, which quotes John 14:6 and points to Jesus as the only Savior, is shared and then publicly chastised and overwhelmingly shot down. 97.5% vote in favor of this new policy. The beginning of this particular motion includes the welcoming of many leaders from different faiths, ironically including Catholics, Sihks, Muslims, Episcopalians, the Ba’ahai faith, the PCUSA, and many more. It sounds like the beginning of a bad joke. “An ELCA-er, a Muslim, and a Sikh walk into a bar...” But it’s not funny.

<sup>23</sup> Prof. Gurgel wrote in 2001, “The ELCA’s wholesale abandonment of key Lutheran teachers (so-called Justification accords with Rome and declaration of “full communion” with denominations such as the Reformed Church of America) leads on to wonder whether the day will come when not only the *Evangelical Lutheran* will be a misnomer, but even *Church*” (“Pastor, Am I Baptized?” pg. 12). He’s not the first and, of course, not the last.

<sup>24</sup> Johann Gerhard writes, “It’s asked: Whether baptism may be considered valid if some letters or syllables are altered in the words. We respond: If the meaning remains whole and uncorrupted, nor is it perverted for some purpose, baptism by that mode ought to be received as legitimate; for not the sound but the sense of the words ought to be received as the institution of Christ.” (*Compendium Theologiae Positivae*, Baier, C.F.W. Walther, editor, St. Louis, Concordia, 1879, Volume IIIb, p. 460, translation by R. Gurgel, “Pastor, Am I Baptized?” p. 4) Concerning the meaning of the Word and its power in the Lord’s Supper, Luther wrote, “(When enemies of the sacrament change the word, they) have nothing but bread and wine; for they also do not have the words and instituted ordinance of God, but have perverted and changed them according to their own imagination.” Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Art. VII, par 32, Concordia, the Lutheran Confessions, pg. 568.



like it who had some kind of washing with some words but it wasn't τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι (Eph. 5:25-26)?<sup>25</sup> I wouldn't be surprised.<sup>26</sup>

So, for the time being, our discussions with former ELCA people about what was said, done, taught, and happened at their baptism (and/or that of their children) is healthy and prudent. At the very least, if all was well, we get to remind them of the promises of God and the power of his Word in baptism despite other surrounding errors. Or you could always call their former ELCA pastor. Maybe you'll have more luck (and desire) than I did.

*Reformed Presbyterian*

The Presbyterian pastor that I spoke with wasn't really keen on me interviewing him. And he was kind of skeptical of what I was going to do with his words. That was seen with how he had his Westminster Confessions open. I sent the questions ahead of time. He was ready. He even shared a printed copy.

The essence of baptism is all there. "We would never baptize in any way except for with water and the name of the Triune God" he said. And the amount of water? "We have a font probably much like yours. But if someone wants to go down the river, why not? That tickles my Baptist friends."

I asked him where baptism gets its power and what role the Holy Spirit plays. He literally read,

The grace which is exhibited in or by the sacraments rightly used, is not conferred by any power in them; neither does the efficacy of a sacrament depend upon the piety or intention of him that administers it but upon the work of the Spirit, and the word of institution, which contains, together with a precept authorizing the use thereof, a promise of benefit to worthy receivers.<sup>27</sup>

When I asked him if there was any spiritual benefit conveyed in baptism, the basic answer was, "kind of." The Presbyterian pastor said, "There isn't anything inherently powerful in the water. This is a sign of them (the baptized) being connected to Christ who alone can take away sins and regenerate the human heart." We acknowledge that Christ alone saves, but I asked how does salvation reach a person, like an infant, for example? He said, "We trust the Holy Spirit is going to bless that child through their participation in the covenant community." He was referring to the child's Christian family and the local congregation. This merits a brief touching on understanding of "the covenant" or "the covenant of grace."

Although there is enough about covenant language and the hermeneutical hopscotch that differs between Presbyterians, Baptists, and us to fill another conference docket (not it!), allow this brief

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<sup>25</sup> "25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her <sup>26</sup> to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, <sup>27</sup> and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." "25 Οἱ ἄνδρες, ἀγαπάτε τὰς γυναῖκας, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν καὶ ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς, <sup>26</sup> ἵνα αὐτὴν ἀγιάσῃ καθαρίσας τῷ λουτρῷ τοῦ ὕδατος ἐν ῥήματι, <sup>27</sup> ἵνα παραστήσῃ αὐτὸς ἑαυτῷ ἕνδοξον τὴν ἐκκλησίαν, μὴ ἔχουσαν σπύλον ἢ ῥυτίδα ἢ τι τῶν τοιούτων, ἀλλ' ἵνα ἡ ἀγία καὶ ἄμωμος.

<sup>26</sup> I am sure that we all have some crazy ELCA stories. Two stick out to me. A former member said that the pastor started teaching that the Holy Spirit was as female because that's the gender in New Testament Greek. And at a broader synodical gathering, openly practicing lesbians danced around the altar at a conference to help people "celebrate communion more fervently and with greater diversity."

<sup>27</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, cap. 27, par. 3. He even had it highlighted for me.

explanation. They refer to the second covenant promised and fulfilled in the person and work of Christ as the covenant of Christ or the covenant of grace. They also talk about the sacraments in ways that are similar, but these do not ensure that the Holy Spirit is creating faith and making that recipient a regenerated child of God.

Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper... There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.<sup>28</sup>

So, when this Presbyterian pastor said that "both children and adults receive the sign of the covenant and need to be incorporated in the family of believers" he doesn't mean that there is actual grace and faith conferred. We agree that the Spirit creates faith but, I asked, why can't the Spirit do that in anyone in baptism by the power of the Word? He said, "There is a general grace conferred through the Word, and a saving grace that is accomplished." Here is where we see Calvin's TULIP theology serving as the launching pad.<sup>29</sup>

Reading Calvin's institutes has some solid material on the doctrine of justification by faith.<sup>30</sup> But from there, things get squirrely as the doctrine of election (double predestination) influences all. Give Calvinists some credit that the center of their theology is a sincere emphasis towards *solus Deo Gloria*. But starting with the doctrine of election leaves everyone asking, "How can one tell if they are part of the elect?" The answer for the infant being baptized? This Presbyterian pastor said, "We trust that through their connection to the covenant community (family and congregation) they will be part of God's family. And we trust God's goodness in this."

However, in this framework, grace can't be assuredly conferred because we don't know if a child is part of the elect. He wouldn't say that the family's faith saves the child. So, what then? So much for rock-solid assurance of one's salvation! The assurance is found not in the clear promises of God and the power of the Spirit in baptism to save. The assurance rests on the hope that this child will remain in that Christian family and congregation through which the child will later be shown to be a believer. (What?!)

He said, "When infants are baptized, they are connected to their Christian family and to God's congregation. That needs to play out in their life, but we trust the goodness of God in this." When asked what assurance could be given to a child who is baptized and then, God forbid, passed away, he said, "we trust the sovereignty of God in all of this." At least his theology is consistent as seen in the fact that they would point to the sovereignty of God and not necessarily the application of God's saving grace in Christ through the Spirit's working in baptism. We, on the other hand, use two fingers, one pointing to both Fatherly goodness and one to the font of baptism.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. cap. 7, par. 6

<sup>29</sup> "T" = total depravity; "U" = unconditional election; "L" = limited atonement; "I" = irresistible grace; "P" = perseverance of the saints. For a concise treatment with plenty of Bible references, see [http://www.prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet\\_41.html](http://www.prca.org/pamphlets/pamphlet_41.html)

<sup>30</sup> All 23 paragraphs are loaded with wonderful language about our justification being in Christ. But the chapter on election, (double predestination) brings some unfortunate qualifications, i.e. limited atonement. John Calvin, *The Institutes of The Christian Religion*, 3:11.

## *Southern Baptist & Reformed Baptist*

I talked with three Southern Baptist pastors, who for the sake of anonymity will go by A, B, & C, and two Reformed Baptist pastors, who will go by D & E.<sup>31</sup> As you are well aware, there are some major differences between the average Southern and Reformed Baptists. Incidentally, Pastor E even described himself as “confessional.”

Probably the simplest explanation that I could give in highlighting their differences is that Reformed Baptists use very similar covenant language as well as an emphasis on the covenant community compared to the Presbyterians as explained above. However, they function as Baptists would when it comes to most other matters in their ministry of preaching and baptizing. Pastor E put it this way:

Whereas a Presbyterian would baptize their child into the covenant community of the church, a Reformed Baptist wouldn't. We raise our kids pretty much the same as members of the covenant community of the church (compared to Presbyterians). We just view baptism as an external participation which, at such a young age, they haven't experienced that internal reality of regeneration and the new birth.

Trying not to paint with a broad brush, if Calvinists and Arminians are on opposite ends of the Baptist camp, Reformed Baptists generally lean to the former and most Southern Baptists lean towards the latter.

For all of these Baptist pastors, the key is not so much bringing people to the gospel in the means of grace, trusting the Spirit to work through that gospel in those means to create faith. Rather, the goal is to share the gospel message of Jesus, to trust in that gospel as power, but with a strong emphasis in leading that person to a profession of their faith. That is where and how they know that a person is a believer. Pastor C said, “There *has to be* a profession of faith.” Pastor A put it more strongly, stating that “choosing is synonymous with believing.” Pastor B said, “What else does it mean when Jesus says to believe and then be baptized’ (Mk. 16:16)? If a person is not a believer, they have no business being baptized.”

No surprise, they draw the line of baptism after a person has become a believer, “got saved”, made their decision for Christ, etc.<sup>32</sup> Pastor C spoke quite clearly:

I think that a lot of this comes down to soteriology. We believe that God gives faith and enacts faith. We are enough like Calvinists to know that God saves... that God has this conditional election that we don't merit. But in the Scriptures, it seems clear to us that there is this mental or heart assent that God gives for men or women to say, “Okay, I believe, repent, confess my sin.” And so, our pattern is that when they have made their profession of faith, then we baptize. So, it comes down to a view of salvation. God gives faith. You might say through the water. And we would go, “Well no. It's when they were 8, 9, 10, 11, or 50.

Pastor D was also pretty clear. When I asked about the Holy Spirit's role in baptism, he didn't like the wording:

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<sup>31</sup> I recorded three of the five interviews. I took notes on paper with the other two.

<sup>32</sup> Can we agree that using this terminology in our circles, in our preaching, and with our people is rarely helpful? I don't know that I would say that a guy's “Lutheran card” should be revoked if this slips out in his speech. I would suggest that we probably won't clear up that loaded of context in our hearers' heads when they hear the words “got saved.”

We wouldn't phrase that question at all in that way. We would practice believer's baptism. So the role of the Holy Spirit came first in regeneration and conversion. And then once someone professed faith in Christ, gives credible evidence of faith in Christ, that's when we would look at the ordinance of baptism. So in the actual ordinance itself of someone going under the water, I don't know that there is this specific role that the Holy Spirit plays at that point. We would say that all that happened at regeneration: adoption, justification, baptism by the Holy Spirit, all that happened then. So (water baptism) is more of an outward symbol of an inward work that has already taken place by the Holy Spirit.

Pastor E put it this way, "What matters at the end of the day is a profession of faith; that someone is trusting Christ." After talking about baptism as an outward sign based on this faith, Pastor A then followed it up with an illustration. He took his wedding ring off and said, "I would still be married to my wife without my ring on. But this is a sign of the promises we made."

Ironically, Luther also used marriage as illustration, although in a completely different way. "If a girl married a man reluctantly and without a wife's affection for the man... But after two years she gains affection for him. Would then a second engagement be required, a second wedding... as if she had not previously been a wife?"<sup>33</sup>

Clearly, there is a big difference between Lutherans and Baptists in terms of how we get to that point of professing faith in Christ. We have noted that this is *the* difference. Where Lutherans hold dearly to the Spirit's working in the means of grace, Baptists hold visible evidence in the profession of one's faith. Yet, wherever an emphasis is placed on the person's profession and "credible evidence" of their faith, the weaker party in this God-saving-man relationship gets more than just some added attention. He gets onus.

I asked about how they pastor people who are looking for assurance of their faith, and if baptism has any part in that. Emphasis on the person became very apparent. This was especially the case when each of them brought up two passages: Mark 16:16, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." And Romans 10:9 "If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." These were used in such a way to say, "See? Believe first. Then get baptized."

There's just one problem, aside from the fact that those passages are being butchered in that way. If so much depends on a person's believing, and if the way that a person believes is by professing Christ, then how can one ever truly know if they believe? To believe and to confess one's faith are not the same. Luther has a lot to say on this:

The text does not say, "He who confesses," but "He who believes." To have his confession is not to know his faith.... So whoever bases baptism on the faith of the one to be baptized can never baptize anyone. Even if you baptized a person a hundred times a day you would not at all know if he believes. Why then do you carry on with your rebaptizing, since you contradict

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<sup>33</sup> Luther's works, Vol. 40, pg. 246. He continues in an entertaining way, "So also if an adult falsely allows himself to be baptized but after a year comes to faith, so you mean, that he should be rebaptized? He received the correct baptism incorrectly, I hear you say. His impropriety makes baptism improper. Should then human error and wickedness be stronger than God's good and invisible order? God made a covenant with the people of Israel on Mt. Sinai. Some did not receive that covenant rightly and in faith. If now these later came to faith, should the covenant, dear sir, therefore be considered invalid, and must God come again to each one on Mt. Sinai in order to renew the covenant?" (pg. 247)

yourself and baptize when you are not sure that faith is present, and yet you teach that faith must certainly be present. ... They base their rebaptizing on an uncertain faith....

So I contend that if they want to do justice to this passage "Whoever believes," according to their understanding, they must condemn rebaptism much more earnestly than the first baptism. Neither the baptizer nor the baptized can maintain his position, for both are uncertain of their faith, or at least are in constant peril and anxiety.... (This verse) makes it a matter of every man's conscience to realize that if he is to be saved, he must believe and not pretend that it is sufficient for a Christian to be baptized.... One must believe but we neither should nor can know it for certain.<sup>34</sup>

And later, "Since there is no difference in baptism whether lack of faith precedes or follows, baptism doesn't depend on faith."<sup>35</sup> Yet of all the places that we would direct a person who is looking for assurance in their faith, the last place we would point them is inward.

Almost all of them asked me what I would do in that scenario. Happy they asked, I talked a lot about our faith being only as good as what we have faith in. The beauty of pointing people to Christ is that he is strong enough when we aren't. And in the moment of that gospel conversation, the Spirit is doing his work how he wills. If we were to point the afflicted soul to themselves in any way, it would only be to remind them of what God did to and for them in their baptism. We get to remind them of what they received at the Lord's table. The verbiage we use is not "you need to" but rather, "this is for you" *and* God gives this "to you". And all of the promises of God in Christ are "yes" for that person. So, we can say, "Stop looking at yourself and simply hear God's promises to love and save you in Christ. Know that he is saying "yes" when he looks at you. And through Christ our 'Amen' is spoken to the glory of God" (2 Corinthians 1:20).

When asked about the challenges of leading people to "real faith", each of these pastors admitted that we are never going to know completely. We would only agree. Yet it stands to reason that within this framework there is an implicit if not explicit pressure not just on the pastor but on the believer. When asked about these pressures that they and others feel in this regard, the answers were interesting. Pastor C described a frequent conversation in their "new members class".

"How do I know that I am saved?" That's what everyone's asking. What they are really asking is... "I still sin. So...?" And so, we tell them "If you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth, you're saved." And then we talk about evidences. "There is fruit of God's Spirit being in you that comes on the outside. Did you believe in your heart? Did you confess with your mouth? Great. You're saved." But if people are questioning if they really meant it. Then we can look at the fruit.

I don't think that we would disagree with all of that. If a person is questioning their salvation, we can ask them questions like, "Doesn't the fact that you're asking say something? Would an unbeliever likely care? So...?" We could even say, "Look at all that God has done in your life and through your life." However, looking at the impetus behind such counseling, there is a big difference in stressing the *source* of the fruit and in the *kinds* of fruit.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Luther's Works, Vol. 40, pgs. 240-241.

<sup>35</sup> Luther's works, Vol. 40, pg. 248.

<sup>36</sup> One can't help but recall Jesus' words in John 15, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing." I can't think of a time when Jesus ever

Pastor A said, "The goal for children and adults is to come to saving faith. So, in working with them, we have a desire for organic versus pressure when it comes to conversion." He noted that there certainly are a lot of "convert pressures" which are inherent in this framework. And that is why he said, "We're not always going to be right when working with someone. And instead of trying to get people to know for sure whether or not they believe, it's important to lead them back to the gospel again and again." That last part is music to our Lutheran ears. The "get people to know for sure" part? Not so much.

Even so, there is a great danger that still exists when so much focus is on the person. So dangerous in fact that it can sound like we are standing toe-to-toe with Catholics in the Middle Ages.<sup>37</sup> When asked about finding assurance and dealing with pressures Pastor D, "We would come alongside them and talk to them about the evidences that we do see in their life." Pastor C acknowledged the pitfalls when he said,

There's been a lot of confusing things that Baptists have done in the past. Like, "Do you know that you know that you know that you are saved." Or, "Did you mean it with all your heart?" Those things aren't in the Scriptures. Those aren't helpful in how we are thinking about salvation.

And so, it's no surprise that when they emphasize a personal, intellectual, volitional, and, in some ways, visible assent to faith, they will draw the line of baptism after that assent. Pastor C went on to say next,

So, the story that we hear a lot is that, "I was baptized young and now I really repent of my sin." ... We see, in my opinion, it's God that saves, and men confess and believe. Now, does God force the Words in your mouth? I don't know. I don't think so. Maybe. We see the pattern in Scriptures being that event of the justification, when it happens in a person's life. Then we follow that; and the first act of obedience is baptism.

When asked about where baptism fits with a person struggling in their faith, Pastor E spoke much differently, saying,

When people say that they have faith in the complete work of Christ, and that is our only hope for standing before a holy God... When people say that to us, then our response is, "You're going to be baptized into the church." There are some (Calvinistic and even Reformed Baptists) who would have a number of boxes to check. "We want to see evidences here, fruit here, proof there." Even, "We're going to watch you for six months." And that's just not how we understand the Bible in a covenantal framework.

Pastor D, however, went a bit further said,

I would say to the person, "Why do you have no assurance? Are you looking for a feeling or an emotion? What is your confidence in? Is it in that act of baptism or is your confidence in Christ in what he's done?" I'm going to try and get at, are they really saved? Do they really know. Can they articulate the gospel? Maybe they have sin in their life. It could be faulty thinking that they could lose their salvation. I would try to get at what is driving that. And then I'd say, "Come and experience among Christians who have assurance." We see this in

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talked about evidences first. The only time I can recall Jesus pointing at evidences was in pronouncements of judgment.

<sup>37</sup> Remember what I said in footnote 20?



the gospels. (And) “We work out our salvation with fear and trembling.” Are they doing that? It’s a long process before we baptize them for good measure. We don’t do that because there is nothing saving about that act. So, time number seven doesn’t save you. Nor did times one through six.

I was in listening mode; not debate mode. So, I didn’t go down all of those rabbit trails. But this is the way that the Reformed Baptists I know and met think and talk. Where would we start? To similar points Luther goes back to the essence of baptism, the command and power of God. Instead of encouraging a person to trust their own faith, they should sound like this:

Yes, sir, I do believe, but I do not build on this my faith. It might be too weak or uncertain. I want to be baptized because it is God’s command that I should be, and on the strength of this command I dare to be baptized. In time my faith may become what it may. If I am baptized on his bidding I know for certain that I am baptized. Were I to be baptized on my own faith, I might tomorrow find myself unbaptized, if faith failed me, or I became worried that I might not yesterday have had the faith rightly. ... But baptism in itself is not therefore wrong or uncertain, is not a matter of venture, but is as sure as are the Word and command of God.<sup>38</sup>

Compare that to Pastor C’s words, “If somebody is baptized at 20 and then runs a drug empire for 20 years, and then they make a profession of faith afterwards.<sup>39</sup> Then the baptism at 20 was null and void. It was before faith. It was before regeneration. We would baptize them here.”

Where they draw the line of baptism means a lot for the subject of adults struggling with their faith, and identifying what faith is and what fuels it. It has everything to do with how many times they would be willing to baptize someone. It may surprise you that none of them agreed with baptizing someone over and over again. They confirmed that baptisms have gotten out of hand in the Baptist church. For example, the one lady who shared that she was going to get baptized for the 20<sup>th</sup> time. Pastor E said, “Yea that’s crazy. I would want to talk with her about when she could profess the gospel clearly and the baptism that happened back then.” Pastor D said, “I would ask them, ‘Who did this to you? Why did you do this to yourself?’”

Identifying faith and what fuels it also has everything to do with another major subject: the baptism of infants. Most surprising was what Pastor D said about pastoring parents who ask about baptizing their kids:

No matter what we say, we don’t want to give false assurance of salvation. ... If (for example when it comes to a kids and parents) there is no sense of guilt before God over their sin... then we might need to hold off (on baptism) for a while. And I admit that we are going to get it wrong. We are going to baptize people who aren’t regenerated. We are going to delay people who are. But the Lord knows those who are his. And we can’t fully know the human heart. We do the best we can with what we’ve been given to look at.

Pastor A noted that when working with kids, the priority remains; i.e. leading them to profess Christ. He wants them “to be clear on why they want to be baptized, and where they are with

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<sup>38</sup> Luther’s Works, Vol. 40, pg. 253

<sup>39</sup> Not more than ten minutes after he use this illustration, one of his members walked over. He was a pilot who flew drugs and money into Equador for 35 years of his life and recently, “gave his life to Christ.” He asked if I was going to get on board and do some Baptist mission work. I laughed, mostly because he was massive, tall, bald, tatted up, and looked like he could have crushed my skull in his hands.

Christ. ... Are they 'really a Christian?' But you can't do that with an infant." All of which flows from their answer to the question, "Can infants have faith?" Their answer is no.

Pastor B said, "We never see babies baptized once in the Bible." The others said the same thing. If you assumed this would be their "go-to" argument. You're right. They all said it.<sup>40</sup>

In my conversations I admitted that I really don't like it when those who practice infant baptism make the "household" argument as their mainsail. Do I think there were little ones in either Lydia's and the Philippi jailer's households who were baptized? Sure. But it's not the starting point, or the end.<sup>41</sup> Instead, our better answer follows this logic from Scripture. 1) All need saving grace because of sin (Ps. 51:5). 2) God alone saves by grace through faith in Christ (Ro. 3:23,24; 5:1,2; ). 3) the Holy Spirit communicates that grace and creates faith through the gospel in the Word and sacraments, including baptism (Ti. 3:5; Ro. 6:1-5).

We admit that there is something remarkable about the baptisms in the New Testament. When asked what we make of "only adults being baptized, definitively speaking" we have answers. First, these are descriptive passages, not prescriptive. If descriptive passages about adult baptisms become prescriptive for all baptisms, then, logically, the Lord's Supper is only for those disciples who are long gone.<sup>42</sup> Second, we can also say that it makes sense that the Holy Spirit would include such transformational baptisms in the New Testament as amazing things happened in the flourishing early Church. The day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, Lydia, the jailor at Philippi, and the Ethiopian eunuch are shocking. That the Holy Spirit was looking for shock value is not the point. That such baptisms are memorable is a point.

We can admit that there is something attractive about people being baptized later on. Even though we don't agree with the premise, we can rejoice over the sincere faith that the Holy Spirit has created in their hearts as well as the joy they have in this washing. Both Reformed Baptist pastors conveyed that for the sake of the person's memory alone, that is reason enough to wait.

For similar reasons and with mutual respect Pastor D did admit that our theology of infant baptism is attractive. He said, "I remember sitting there with my eldest son, just born, in my arms for the first time. I really wrestled with this. I obviously came out where I did, but I see that there is some serious attraction to this."

Of course, this led to questions about whether infants believe? Much has been covered above about what they mean about "believing" and its presumed connection to an intellectual and volitional capacity. Infants, in their framework, don't possess that capacity.

Pastor B said abruptly, "No." When I asked him for his take on passages, you can probably guess what was said. Acts 2:38-39: "Peter replied, 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will

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<sup>40</sup> In Thomas Nettles' Baptist response to the Lutheran view in "Understanding Four Views on Baptism" he states his two major disagreements: 1) no instance of infant baptism in Scripture, and 2) no instance of salvation apart from the word heard (pg. 111).

<sup>41</sup> Luther used it as one of his arguments, although fifth in a list of six. Luther's Works, Vol. 40, p. 257.

<sup>42</sup> Someone will state, "Yea, Caleb, but what about 1 Corinthians 10 & 11?" And I'll say, "Thanks for bringing up prescriptive passages, and for proving my point."

call." He said, "This assumes that you can repent." And... "The promise is for children who would eventually believe."

And Psalm 22:6: "Yet you brought me out of the womb; you made me trust in you, even at my mother's breast." He said, "That is a special case for which we don't have answers."

Prying further, I asked about the age of accountability. Pastor C summed up what I heard from all of them, although with a bit more transparency than the rest:

So, that's something we kind of made up. It ends up being a practical guideline in the Baptist church, but it's not something that we see in the Scriptures. For a person to believe, profess, repent... I've never known a three-year-old who can really do that. Like *really* understand that they have sinned. So that is why when it comes to a three-year-old that dies... do they go to heaven? We trust God's goodness. Yes. There are instances in Scripture where if they come from a family of faith. Yes. Whether it comes to whether or not we baptize them... what it comes down to is if they are able to consciously assent to God's work in their life. It's not their work. They aren't meriting anything. ... Basically, trust God's goodness in case something happens earlier. Can they confess, believe, repent? Five, six, seven years old is when that commonly happens.

You undoubtedly see the inconsistency in this reasoning. When it comes to those who aren't old enough, we trust God's goodness. And that's huge! But when it comes to those who are old enough to consciously decide, then we turn towards the one who must consciously choose. What's the difference between the miracle of faith in an infant or toddler compared to an adult like me? Nothing! But when baptism is the first act of obedience, of course, the cart precedes the horse.

You can also see that when they draw the line of baptism where they do, there is no solid answer as to when someone could be baptized. In all fairness, they all said that under five is rare if not a "no." Again, so much depends on where the person is in their understanding and ability.

I shared with each of them an experience I had with a former preschooler who belonged to a Baptist church. Her dad called one Sunday and wanted our preschool director and me to attend her baptism that afternoon at a nearby lake. While on the phone he divulged that he was a little worried whether his daughter was ready. They talked with the pastors. The pastors left it up to the parents. The girl was pretty mature for her age. But she was five or six at that time. I knew that this wasn't the time to tell the dad what I was really thinking.<sup>43</sup> Therefore, I simply reminded him of the power of the Holy Spirit and the promises of God to work through his powerful name. My preschool director and I attended. It was something to see.

After sharing that story, not mentioning which Baptist church it was, I asked them if they thought that was a good idea. Two said, "Maybe. Hard to say." Three said, "No." Of those three, two belonged to the Baptist church that did the baptisms that day. This simply illustrates that they are all over the board on when to baptize a child.

No surprise, when it comes to children being able to believe, Luther has a bit to say:

Inasmuch as John had faith, though he could not speak or understand, your argument fails, that children are not able to believe. ... Bring forth a single verse which proves that children cannot believe in baptism. I have cited many verses showing that they can believe (Mt. 2:16;

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<sup>43</sup> "WELL, NO DUH YOU ARE DOUBTING IF YOUR DAUGHTER IS READY, BECAUSE..."

19:14; Lk. 1:41; Is. 55:11), and that it is reasonable to hold that they do believe. I grant that we do not understand how they do believe, or how faith is created. But that is not the point here.<sup>44</sup>

When I asked one of them about the history of baptism, specifically the infant baptism of Polycarp (AD 69-155), Irenaeus, or Hippolytus, this was dismissed with hardly a second glance.<sup>45</sup> Pastor E said, "That was the way of the church at that time. That doesn't mean that they were right." So, either our Church Fathers didn't know better or it was universally forced on them?

Finally, we talked about the mode of baptism a little bit. They are all very big on immersion. None of them seemed interested in the amount of water. They all said that it follows the pattern seen in the New Testament. They didn't ask about ours. (Ironically, one of these pastors has visited on a Sunday when an infant was baptized.) I didn't press it further.

## Conclusion:

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*"I walk the line." ~ Johnny Cash*

How did they know to capture Pastor H? In the weeks after his death they discovered that someone pretending to be a Christian had betrayed him. That line couldn't be crossed. It wasn't the first time someone died for their faith. Although we know the times, we pray it will be the last. And even if this subject isn't deadly among us, there is no room for "playing Switzerland" on this matter.<sup>46</sup> Maybe we can walk this line with two encouragements.

First, we have nothing to be afraid of. Baptism is all gospel and that is God's power. The one thing we would never say is that these differences don't matter. In the words of Prof. Paustian,

Is there grace to be found for my baby girl in that simple water and Word that is Holy Baptism? Disagree with my joyful yes if you must, but don't say it doesn't matter. It matters to her as few things in her life ever will. Beneath the disagreements between church bodies that can seem petty from the outside are matters of profound spiritual importance.<sup>47</sup>

Second, we know that we will always be fighting against the devil, whether it is his most heinous evil or his most subtle attacks on dear doctrines, like baptism.

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<sup>44</sup> Luther's Works, Vol. 40, pp. 242-243.

<sup>45</sup> There was never a time in the early New Testament Church when babies weren't baptized. Polycarp (69-155 AD), a disciple of the Apostle John, was baptized as an infant. Irenaeus (130-200 AD) writes in *Against Heresies* (II 22:4), "that Jesus came to save all through means of Himself — all, I say, who through Him are born again to God — infants and children, boys and youth, and old men." Hippolytus, in his *Apostolic Tradition* (21), writes, "At cockcrow prayer shall be made over the water. 1 The stream shall flow through the baptismal tank or 2 pour into it from above when there is no scarcity of water; but if there is a scarcity, whether constant or sudden, then use whatever water you can find. They shall remove their clothing. And first baptize 3,4 the little ones; if they can speak for themselves, they shall do so; if not, their parents or other relatives shall speak for them. Then baptize the men, and last of all 5 the women; they must first loosen their hair and put aside any gold or silver ornaments that they were wearing; let no one take any alien thing down to the water with them."

<sup>46</sup> Yes, the Anabaptist movement caught fire in Zurich, Switzerland.

<sup>47</sup> Paustian, *Prepared to Answer*, p. 116.

Therefore, whoever desires to see the Christian Church existing in quiet peace, entirely without crosses, without heresy, and without factions, will never see it thus, or else he must view the false church of the devil as the real church. Christ himself says, “For it is necessary that offenses come, but woe to the man by whom it comes” (Mt. 18:7). And St. Paul, “There must be heresy or factions, in order that they who have proven themselves may be recognized” (1 Cor. 11:19).<sup>48</sup>

Although we are not in a setting where lives will be claimed, the lines are still drawn and crossed throughout the Christian landscape. And these lines will remain until we are in heaven with our Christian brothers and sisters of all different denominations, standing before God with no division, no lines, one framework—the image of God restored and realized through Christ. Forever.

Until that day, the gospel in Word, supper and water is our sole concern.

*“There is nothing worth comparing to this lifelong comfort sure!  
Open-eyed my grave is staring: even there I’ll sleep secure.  
Though my flesh awaits its raising,  
Still my soul continues praising:  
I am baptized into Christ; I’m a child of paradise.”<sup>49</sup>*

### *Further thoughts to consider, time permitting...*

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- Where does baptism belong in worship? When long-standing references to baptism are replaced, do our people get enough of it elsewhere in worship?
- What about our understanding of baptism gives us an advantage as we counsel, carry out youth ministry, and preach in our relatively similar ministry context?
- What about our culture provides a perfect audience for our understanding of baptism? For adults? For youth?
- Aside from other denominations, what other pressures do we experience which seek to downplay the “arrow-down” grace of God in baptism?

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<sup>48</sup> Luther, Martin, *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 34, p. 215.

<sup>49</sup> Erdmann Neumeister, 1671-1756; tr. Robert E. Voelker, b. 1957, *Christian Worship Supplement #737*

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