

RESOLUTION on CHRISTIAN BAPTISM
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INTRODUCTION

Christian baptism has largely become a casualty of modern theological minimalism, where doctrinal rigor is shelved in favor of a psychologized, self-help religion. There is diminished emphasis on careful teaching of its biblical foundations and theological meaning such that baptism is increasingly understood as a nonessential adjunct in the Christian life. And as baptism is downplayed, we lose its New Testament portrayal as the decisive, transitional act of radical Christian obedience where a former way of life is renounced, and a commitment made to “*walk in newness of life*” (Romans 6:4).

Our sincere hope in exploring anew this Christ-exalting subject is to rekindle a fervor for this rich biblical doctrine and to recover a robust understanding of Christian baptism, the ordinance from which we Baptists take our name.

THE THEOLOGY OF BAPTISM

Baptism means something. It is a dramatic portrayal of the gospel of Christ, signifying union with the Savior in His death, burial and resurrection. It is important precisely because it is tied to the gospel, to the saving work that Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection.

Baptism is an act of worship in which a believer symbolically identifies himself with the Savior’s atoning work and devotes himself to a lifetime of faith and yielding to Christ’s Lordship. The rite of baptism is the Christian’s first obedience, initiating the believer into Christian discipleship.

The biblical model for Christian baptism is full immersion into water of a confessing, repentant believer in Jesus as the Christ. The parameters within which baptism is biblically couched — what constitutes the act, who should be baptized, and who should administer the rite — shall emerge through our review of baptism in its theological context.

Baptism in the Gospels

Though they contain relatively few mentions of baptism, the canonical Gospels relate three¹ narratives essential to the point: the ministry of John the Baptizer, John’s baptism of Jesus, and Jesus’ giving of the *Great Commission*.

The majority of Gospel mentions of baptism relate to the ministry of John the Baptist, who fulfilled an important, albeit transitional purpose. The first words penned in Mark’s Gospel (1:1-4) paint John’s

¹ John’s Gospel also mentions a fourth, a baptism administered by Jesus’ disciples (4:1-2), which may have served to transition between the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus.

esteemed place in the history of redemption:

The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God; As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.

In his fusion of two prophecies (Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3) in this passage, Mark unmistakably identifies John as the forerunner of Christ — the one who would go before and prepare the way of the Lord. John’s preaching would call people to repentance in anticipation of the coming of God’s kingdom in and through the Messiah. “*John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance,*” Paul would later summarize, “*saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus*” (Acts 19:4).

John’s ministry of baptism is set against a backdrop of ritual cleansing,² so it no doubt evoked images of ritual purification for a witnessing Jew. Yet the many references to repentance and forgiveness of sins make it clear that John’s baptism is not to be understood merely in terms of religious observance.

John acknowledges (John 1:26, 33) that he baptized with water, but that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Ghost — and, as Matthew (3:11) and Luke (3:16) record, with fire. The Gospels explicitly reveal that the aim of John’s baptism was that the Messiah “*should be made manifest to Israel*” (John 1:31). John’s baptism was not an end in itself, but had a decidedly prophetic, Christological orientation. His message of repentance similarly was not an ultimate goal, but rather a preparation for the coming Messiah. The Baptizer was a forerunner whose prominence would fade at the Messiah’s appearing (John 3:30): his entire ministry pointed forward to the coming Lamb of God who would sacrificially atone for His beloved.

Who better to reveal Jesus as the Christ than the forerunner himself, and on what better occasion than His baptism? When Jesus came to Jordan to be baptized of John,³ John confirmed His identity as the long-awaited Messiah (John 1:29b-30): “*Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me.*” Initially reluctant, John relented and baptized the Greater One, an act that would “*fulfil all righteousness*” (Matthew 3:15), would prophesy of His own atoning death and resurrection, and would publicly demonstrate His complete concord with and submission to the Father’s will. In His baptism, Jesus simultaneously identifies with a sinful Israel and points to the cross.

All four Gospels note Jesus’ baptism as the occasion of a major Trinitarian manifestation, with the Father voicing approval and the Spirit “*descending like a dove, and lighting upon*” the Son (Matthew

² In Old Testament times, rites of immersion were associated with maintaining ritual purity (Leviticus 15; 16:4, 24; 2 Kings 5). Contemporary with John, immersion into water still was used for this purpose within Pharisaic Judaism (Matthew 15:2; John 2:6). And immersion in ritual baths was required of all Jews to preserve their purity for temple service (John 11:55; Acts 21:24-27).

³ It could rightly be said that the Gospel begins with Jesus’ literal water baptism by John and concludes with His metaphorical immersion into suffering and death (Luke 12:50). All three synoptic Gospels record John’s baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22). Though presupposed, the actual baptism is not narrated in John’s account, though the Spirit’s dove-like appearing is.

3:16-17; Mark 1:10-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32). John's Gospel attests that the Spirit's appearance signifies that in the future Jesus would Himself baptize with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33).

Matthew's Gospel famously concludes (28:18b-20) with Christ's commissioning His disciples:⁴

All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen.

This charge is predicated upon the Father's having given all authority⁵ to Christ, who, onto His followers then confers missionary authority to make disciples⁶ of "all nations, baptizing them... and... teaching them." "Baptizing" and "teaching" qualify the making of disciples and imply the forging of an identity with Christ. The disciples are to be baptized "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" and are to be taught "to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded." The mission clearly extends beyond the initial proclamation of the gospel message, encompassing the nurturing of converts into the full obedience of the faith.

Baptism in the Epistles

Paul was the most prolific author of New Testament epistles, so it is no surprise that baptism appears in his writing more than any other; in fact, Peter's first letter contains the only other epistolary mention of baptism. As we consider how these authors unpack Christian baptism, we'll review several passages in the context of two major themes that seem to emerge: the centrality of baptism (Ephesians 4:5; 1 Corinthians 12:13; 1:10-17; 1 Peter 3:21) and our identity with Christ in baptism (Galatians 3:27; Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:11-12; 1 Corinthians 15:29).

The relative lack of sustained discussion of baptism in the epistles should not be mistaken as an indication of its insignificance. In fact, one might argue that as the letters were addressed to believers, the authors likely assumed that their readers already had been baptized and instructed about the significance of baptism. Yet we are not left to imagine whether baptism is important.

Paul emphasizes the centrality of baptism in his iterative underscoring of unity among believers. In Ephesians 4:1-6, he urges believers to preserve and pursue the unity of the Spirit based on seven realities that all believers share, including "one baptism" (4:5). Baptism is an initiation rite shared by all belonging to Christ's church:⁷ all have shared in a common salvation experience by being immersed into Christ, and Paul assumes that all believers have been baptized.

⁴ The commission is also related in Mark 16 and John 20: Mark's version is significantly abbreviated; John's does not include baptism.

⁵ The Greek word ἐξουσία (exousia) here translated *power* refers to the power of *authority*, not *might*.

⁶ The Greek words here translated *teach* are different: the first, μαθητεύω (mathēteuō), means *to make disciples*; the second, διδάσκω (didaskō), more akin to our modern concept of teaching, means *to instruct by discourse*.

⁷ Baptism in water and the Spirit are signature events for Christians, marking them out as members of the people of God. Though these baptisms may be distinguished conceptually, Paul was evidently disinterested in separating them since both are associated with the transition from the old life to the new. To restrict any text to either may truncate the baptismal message, introducing a false dichotomy into Paul's argument. Paul does not drive a wedge

Paul continues the same theme in 1 Corinthians 12:13, where he writes that *“by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body, whether we be Jews or Gentiles, whether we be bond or free.”* He is almost certainly speaking of the new birth, when by the Spirit we are immersed into Christ and incorporated into His body. The remainder of the verse, that we *“have been all made to drink into one Spirit,”* expresses the same reality: when we are renewed and converted, we are made to drink of the same Spirit. This divine work — our Spirit baptism or immersion into Christ — occurs at the threshold of the Christian life.

Though baptism is indisputably central to Paul’s understanding, he is careful to warn against its placement outside the context of Christ crucified, where it inevitably becomes distorted. This was the case when, in the context of his rebuke of the Corinthian church for their divisions (1 Corinthians 1:10-17), he asks (1:13), *“Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?”* Baptism, says Paul, doesn’t connect one to the baptizer, but with Christ: which person administered a particular baptism is irrelevant. He continues (1:14-17):

I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.

Paul reminds the Corinthian believers that they were not baptized in his name, but into Christ’s. Especially in light of the divisions in Corinth, he is thankful that he had baptized few there, lest any should think that his baptism conveyed any special meaning. For Paul, baptism — though central — must be subordinated to the Gospel so that it doesn’t sabotage the Gospel.

In few places is baptism as manifestly central as where Peter teaches that *“baptism doth also now save us.”* In his brief treatise (1 Peter 3:18-22), Peter paints baptism as antitypical of the survival of Noah and his family who *“were saved by water.”*⁸ Those submerged in baptism experience a metaphorical death beneath the waters and — just as Noah and his family survived death during the flood — so believers arise from baptismal waters to *“walk in newness of life”* (Romans 6:4).

Peter’s use of the phrase *“baptism doth... save us”* is somewhat surprising. At first blush, this might seem to support a sacramental view — that saving grace is conferred through baptism. But Peter immediately repudiates this notion by parenthetically qualifying his statement (3:21): *“...baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.”* The rite of baptism, he says, does not mechanically or externally save as if there were magical properties in the water. It is not the washing away of dirt from our bodies in baptism that saves, but rather our *“answer of a good conscience toward God”* (i.e., our faith), which is anchored in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Baptism, like faith, is a *subjective* reality of our salvation; it saves in the sense that it is anchored to the *objective* reality of our salvation, Jesus Christ, and in His atoning death and triumphant resurrection (3:22).

between the two as if to suggest that Spirit baptism is essential and water baptism is superfluous. To ask which baptism is in view in a particular context may be moot, for Paul would likely respond, “Both.”

⁸ The raging floodwaters both saved *and* destroyed. Jesus was analogously destroyed by the flood of God’s wrath (Mark 10:38-39; Luke 12:50) so that believers through Him would be saved.

Paul not only deals with the centrality of baptism; he also plumbs its theological depths. In Galatians 3:26-28, he echoes a recurrent theme of unity and commonality in the body of Christ. It is within this context (3:27) that he introduces the idea that in baptism we publicly testify of our relationship with Christ; that is, we become identified with him: *“For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”*

This putting on of Christ is no external embellishment, as Paul demonstrates in two particularly theologically significant passages relative to baptism. In each, Paul paints baptism in the context of the believer’s death to sin. Evidently he wishes to evoke the conversion experience, where the grace of God secures the believer’s freedom from the power of sin. Since he understood baptism as an integral part of this experience, Paul imagined that to refer to their baptism was the most effective way to recall his readers’ conversions.

The first passage is Romans 6:3-4:

Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Paul here elaborates on this idea of *putting on* or *becoming identified with* Christ, of our being *“baptized into⁹ Jesus.”* He appeals to baptism as a dramatic representation of the washing away of the believer’s sins and the new life to which believers are called. The phrases *“baptized into his death”* and *“buried with him”* establish a clear connection between baptism and death to sin; *“as Christ was raised up from the dead”* suggests that baptism is linked with Christ’s victory over death. The imagery is clear: as Christ died and was buried for our sins, so the believer is crucified to his old life, dead to sin and buried beneath the waters; as He was raised victorious over death, so the believer emerges from the waters of baptism to *“walk in newness of life,”* anchored in the hope of life eternal, awaiting the bodily resurrection and the ultimate victory over death and the grave.

Paul’s theme of Christ’s preeminence and sufficiency in his letter to the Colossians is designed to quell any philosophy that minimizes Christ. It is here that we find his second especially weighty text on baptism (2:11-12), where he writes that in Christ

also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who hath raised him from the dead.

Paul’s treatment of baptism here travels in the same orbit as Romans 6, underscoring that the believer identifies with Christ through his metaphorical death and resurrection in baptism. The injection of circumcision (as a metonym for death to sin) into the baptism discourse fits well with Paul’s motif of Christ’s sufficiency. True circumcision, he says, is one *“made without hands”* in the regenerating operation of the Holy Spirit, whose *“circumcision is that of the heart”* (Romans 2:29). This operation

⁹ The notion of identity is affirmed outside the epistles though the use of the Greek word εἰς (eis), which literally means *into*. This word appears in two interesting contexts, both clearly suggestive of identification. The first is Matthew 28:18, where Jesus commissions his disciples to baptize *“in [eis, into] the name of the Father....”* The second occurs on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38), where Peter instructs the believers to be baptized *“for [eis, into] the remission of sins.”* This Greek preposition is never understood to mean *for the purpose of*.

stands in stark contrast to literal physical circumcision, in which misplaced trust for salvation manifestly minimizes Christ. The circumcision Paul describes involves the removal of “*the body of the sins of the flesh*,” a phrase that — because the language so nearly mirrors “*the body of his flesh through death*” (1:22) — almost certainly directly references Christ’s death on the cross “*that the body of sin might be destroyed*” (Romans 6:6). So again in this text Paul emphasizes the connection between baptism and Christ’s atoning death: by virtue of this union, believers receive from the Spirit the only necessary circumcision — the cross of Christ.

One of Paul’s most controversial and difficult texts is 1 Corinthians 15:29, where he references baptism “*for the dead*.” Precisely what is meant by this baptism is the source of considerable speculation and debate, but the specific practice Paul references is irrelevant to his point. Paul was appealing to the Corinthian understanding that baptism was indispensable in support of his theology of the resurrection. Any baptism performed “*for the dead*” is superfluous, Paul argues, if the dead are not raised.

Baptism in Acts

In his “*former treatise*” (the Gospel that bears his name), Luke wrote “*of all that Jesus began both to do and to teach*” (1:1). In *The Acts of the Apostles*, he follows the continuing ministry of the ascended Christ through the promised Comforter (John 14:16), the Holy Spirit. The book is largely a documentary on the spread of the church throughout the known Roman world: “*in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth*” (1:8). For the Christian disciple who today desires to mirror the simple, untarnished teachings and practices of the New Testament church and to rediscover the spirit and fervor of first century Christianity, Luke’s record is eminently relevant.

Luke begins his account of the early church’s growth and development by rehearsing (1:5) Jesus’ reference to the forerunner’s declaration that “*I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost*” (Mark 1:8).¹⁰ This *Holy Ghost* baptism prophesied by John and promised by Jesus is evidently God’s special outpouring of the Holy Spirit as a sign of His sanction and authentication of the work of establishing His church. This promised sign (Joel 2:28-32, confirmed in Acts 2:16-21) was first to the Jews at Pentecost, then to the gentiles, “*strangers from the covenants of promise*” (Ephesians 2:12) as confirmation that the gentiles had been grafted in (Romans 11:11-36) and were as much a part of the covenant as the Jews.

John’s baptism is germane to Luke’s treatment of Christian baptism in Acts; these baptisms are examples of step parallelism, where the second advances on and fulfills the first. John’s baptism (itself an advancement on ritual purification) is not nullified, but rather is enlarged and overshadowed by Christian baptism. While both baptisms involve repentance and immersion into water, John’s repentance is understood as essentially moral and ethical in *preparation* for the coming Messiah. Christian baptism, on the other hand, is a *response* to His advent in the life of the child of God where repentance is the outworking of godly sorrow (2 Corinthians 7:10), a conviction of sinfulness wrought by the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰ See also Matthew 3:11; Luke 3:16; John 1:26, 33; Acts 11:16.

In *The Acts of the Apostles*, Luke is less concerned with the theological meaning of Baptism than with its interconnectedness with the Christian conversion experience. He documents eight conversions, each representing a cosmic convergence of the prevenient work of the Spirit,¹¹ the preaching of the gospel, a repentance/faith/confession response, and baptism. The clear pattern is that God prepares the heart to receive the word¹² and sends one to deliver it; then when the gospel is preached, those “*ordained to eternal life*” (13:48) respond in faith and are baptized.¹³ The objective work of God is subjectively appropriated to His chosen vessels, who respond in conversion as penitent, confessing believers, and are baptized.

The day of Pentecost¹⁴ (Acts 2) is the setting for Luke’s first conversion narrative, which serves as a paradigm for the others. As the miraculous event of God’s special Spirit outpouring is “*noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded*” (2:6). Peter rises before this Jewish congregation, boldly preaches that they are responsible for the murder of Jesus, and confidently asserts “*that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ*” (2:36). The Spirit’s preparatory work is manifestly evident in their response. They are “*pricked in their heart*” (2:37) and recognize their utter inability to bridge the chasm separating them from God: “*Men and brethren,*” they ask (2:37), “*what shall we do?*”¹⁵ Peter replies, “*Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Christ for the remission of sins....*” For his Jewish audience, Peter’s explicit association of repentance and baptism with remission (forgiveness) of sins evokes John’s *baptism of repentance*. Baptism and repentance are inseparable (though the nature of repentance differs between John’s and Christian baptism); even in contexts where only one is mentioned, both are to be understood. Confession and faith are also understood in this narrative: through the phrase “*in the name of Christ*” allegiance is declared to a particular name (confession), and knowledge of and belief in the one named (faith) is presupposed. Luke goes on to record that “*they that gladly received Peter’s word*” are baptized and that the disciples grow in number by about three thousand (2:41).

¹¹ The Spirit’s prevenient work as part of the conversion equation is implicit in Luke’s narratives, but is well established scripturally through many witnesses. We know for instance, that man apart from the Spirit is naturally repulsed by the things of God (1 Corinthians 2:14; Romans 3:11-18; John 3:6), and that without the Spirit’s effectual drawing, none can or will come to Him (John 6:44; 6:65).

¹² Cf. The parable of the sower, Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23.

¹³ Paul also connects the gospel, belief and salvation. In 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14, he writes that “*God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth: Whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” And in Romans 10:14-17, Paul argues, “*How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?... So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*”

¹⁴ Also known as the feast of weeks (Deuteronomy 16:10), the feast of harvest (Exodus 23:16) and the day of firstfruits (Numbers 28:26), the day of Pentecost is the fiftieth day following the Passover week Sabbath (Leviticus 23:15-16).

¹⁵ This question is evidently shorthand for “*What shall we do to be saved?*” The phrase “*for the remission of sins*” (2:38) in Peter’s answer is synonymous with salvation (10:43; 11:14; Luke 1:77), and the question appears contextually alongside “*whosoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*” (2:21), “*Save yourselves from this untoward generation*” (2:40), and “*the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved*” (2:47). Note also that in 16:30 the Philippian jailer asks the same — but unabbreviated — question: “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*”

Saul's escalating persecution of Christian disciples effectively serves to further the spread of the gospel, for *"they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word"* (8:4). It is within this context that Luke records two conversion accounts where Philip (a deacon, 6:5) is instrumentally used to take the message. In the first (8:4-13), he takes the gospel to Samaria, where he *"preaches Christ unto them"* (8:5). As on Pentecost, the hearers' response witnesses the Spirit's pre-working, for they *"with one accord gave heed unto those things which Philip spake"* (8:6). The effect mirrors that at Pentecost: *"they believed... the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ,"* and *"they were baptized, both men and women"* (8:12). The conversion pattern is confirmed: the Spirit's handiwork, the preaching of the gospel, a repentance/faith response, and believer's baptism.

The conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch (8:26-39) also repeats the Pentecost pattern. Philip is directed by *"the angel of the Lord"* (8:26) to go down to Gaza, and there to greet an Ethiopian in whom already the Spirit had evidently moved, for the eunuch *"had come to Jerusalem for to worship"* (8:27) and was reading *"the prophet Esaias"* (8:28). Philip preaches *"unto him Jesus"* from Isaiah 53 (8:35), evidently teaching the need for repentance, for the new disciple requests baptism (8:36). Philip is fully satisfied of the eunuch's penitence and faith, for when the convert confesses his belief *"that Jesus Christ is the Son of God"* (8:37), they stop the chariot in which they are riding and Philip baptizes him forthwith.

Luke's record of Saul's conversion (9:1-22)¹⁶ is perhaps his most famous. Saul of Tarsus¹⁷ is a veritable persecution machine, *"breathing out threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord"* (9:1) and wreaking havoc on the church (8:3). Yet he proves no match for the Christ-King against whom he makes war. His conversion represents a most improbable transformation: God chooses a sworn enemy *"to bear my name before the gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel"* (9:15). En route to Damascus to arrest Christian disciples, Saul is himself arrested by the Lord (9:3-4): literally blinded by an intense *"light from heaven"* (9:3), he falls to the earth, *"trembling and astonished,"* and asks (9:6), *"Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"* This powerful, learned, in-control persecutor, now weak, confused and blind, is led like a helpless child (9:8) into the city to await further instruction.

In the meantime, God is preparing Ananias (a disciple at Damascus) to send Saul a message. Although informed in a dream of the Spirit's preparatory work in Saul's life (*"behold, he prayeth,"* 9:11) and that Saul himself had seen in a vision to expect him (9:12), Ananias initially has pause because of the persecutor's celebrated reputation (9:13-14). But he is stilled by the message he is tasked to deliver: Saul is God's *"chosen vessel"* (9:15) to minister to the gentiles, *"To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me"* (26:18). Obedient to his call, Ananias visits Saul, *"putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight"* (9:12), and conveys the message of Saul's anointing (22:14-15). Then Ananias directs to Saul a personal appeal for repentance: *"And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord"* (22:16). *"And Saul arose, and was baptized"* (9:18).

¹⁶ Luke recounts this experience twice elsewhere in Acts (22:6-12 and 26:12-23). Paul himself refers to this experience frequently in his letters, including Galatians, Philippians, 1 Corinthians, and 1 Timothy.

¹⁷ Saul (later to become the Apostle Paul) was first referred to as *Paul* in 13:9.

Luke's emphasis shifts in Acts 10 to a largely outward-facing ministry to the gentiles. It is in the distinctly Roman city of Caesarea¹⁸ that he records the first gentile conversion:¹⁹ a Roman military officer named Cornelius. In this narrative we find repeated what already has become familiar: God's intimate involvement on both ends of the conversion transaction. Luke tells us that the Spirit has gone before and changed the centurion's heart: he describes Cornelius as "*A devout man, and one that feared God... and prayed to God alway*" (10:2). God directs Cornelius in a vision to send for Simon [Peter], who "*shall tell thee what thou oughtest to do*" (10:6). Cornelius dispatches a threesome to Joppa to call for Peter.

Apart from God's changing his prejudiced heart, Peter never would have conceived of taking the gospel to a gentile; but God's appointed messenger to Cornelius is himself being transformed. Peter has a thrice-repeated vision instructing him to "*kill and eat*" (10:13) from a group of "*all manner of fourfooted beasts of the earth, and wild beasts, and creeping things, and fowls of the air*" (10:12), a non-kosher catch²⁰ that repulses the Jewish Christian. But in the vision Peter also hears a voice telling him, "*What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common*" or unclean (10:16). As he ponders the meaning of the vision, Cornelius' team arrives (10:17). And when Peter learns their mission, the meaning of his vision crystallizes: the *unclean* that God had cleansed was a gentile!

Peter accompanies the men to Caesarea and attends to Cornelius, preaching Christ, "*that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins*" (10:43). Then as a sign and confirmation to Peter's companions, "*the Holy Ghost fell on all them which heard the word*" (10:44) so that they "*believed on the Lord Jesus Christ*" (11:17) and were "*granted repentance unto life*" (11:18). Cornelius evidently requests baptism, for "*Then answered Peter, Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of the Lord*" (10:46b-48a).

Luke next follows as the gospel for the first time crosses into the vast European continent. Obedient to Paul's vision where a man prays him, "*Come over into Macedonia, and help us*" (16:9), Paul, Silas and Timothy make their way across the Aegean Sea to the city of Philippi,²¹ in the Roman province of Macedonia, where we read of two conversions. The first is of Lydia, a businesswoman from Thyatira (modern-day Turkey) who, on the Sabbath is gathered with a group of women "*out of the city by a river side, where prayer was wont to be made*" (16:13). We again learn that the Holy Spirit has preceded this encounter, for Luke tells us that Lydia is one who "*worshipped God... whose heart the Lord opened*" (16:14). Though Paul's precise words to Lydia are not recorded, evidently he urges repentance "*in the*

¹⁸ Caesarea is a city on Israel's Mediterranean coast that was declared autonomous following the Roman conquest (63 BCE), and which King Herod named for his Roman patron, Augustus Caesar.

¹⁹ Why is not the Ethiopian eunuch considered the first gentile convert? The Ethiopian was likely already a Jewish proselyte when he was converted to Christianity, for he had traveled to Jerusalem to worship (8:27), and was reading the Hebrew Scriptures on his return journey (8:28).

²⁰ Leviticus 11 consists of forty-seven verses distinguishing "*between the unclean and clean, and between the beast that may be eaten and the beast that may not be eaten*" (11:47).

²¹ Though Philippi is considered "*the chief city of that part of Macedonia*" and a Roman colony (16:12), Jews were evidently insufficient in number to establish a synagogue, for a minimum of ten men were required. "*By a river*" was a common meeting place in the absence of a synagogue.

name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins,” (2:38) for she and her household are baptized (16:15).

The evangelists are shortly thereafter confronted by a girl “*possessed with a spirit of divination*” (16:16) which cries, “*These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation*” (16:17). Paul’s exorcism of this demon causes a great uproar in the city, leading to the public beating and imprisonment of Paul and Silas (16:16-24). A midnight earthquake causes the prison to be opened and their bands, loosed. The jailer, “*awaking out of his sleep, and... supposing that the prisoners had been fled*” (16:27), was about to take his life when Paul stopped him, indicating that all the prisoners were still there. He falls trembling before Paul and Silas, asking (16:30), “*Sirs, what must I do to be saved?*”²² Luke concludes the story by relating the jailer’s repentance, rejoicing, belief and baptism (16:31-34):

And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house. And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. And he... was baptized, he and all his, straightway. And when he had brought them into his house, he... rejoiced, believing in God with all his house.

Luke’s final narrative — the conversion of “*Crispus, the chief ruler of the synagogue*” (18:8) — occurs at Corinth. The same conversion components we’ve seen before are tightly packed into this brief passage: the Spirit precedes the gospel, for Luke describes Crispus as “*one that worshipped God*” (18:7); Paul preaches Christ and repentance, for there is “*hearing,*” a faith response of belief “*on the Lord,*” and baptism (18:8). And not only is Crispus converted, but his entire household and “*many of the Corinthians*” believe and are baptized.

Throughout Luke’s record in *The Acts of the Apostles*, Christian baptism is understood as essential to the conversion experience, the process of becoming a Christian. As the Christian’s first obedience, baptism follows the inevitable repentance/faith/confession response to the Holy Spirit’s effectual working.

The Parameters

How is baptism to be performed? Different Christian groups administer baptism differently, yet all call it *baptism*: some practice aspersion (sprinkling); some, affusion (pouring); others immerse. Does it really matter? In a word, *yes*. Though we find no *thou-shalt-baptize-by-immersion* biblical directive, there is ample anecdotal and theological evidence to support this conclusion. And taken together with semantics and etymology,²³ the case for immersion is overwhelming.

John the Baptist chose baptismal locations “*because there was much water there*” (John 3:23). After Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, He came “*up straightway out of the water*” (Matthew 3:16). And when Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch, Luke records that “*they went down... into the water... and he baptized him*” and that they came “*up out of the water...*” (Acts 8:38-39). Neither aspersion nor affusion

²² Of what salvation was the jailer inquiring? Salvation from suicide? No, his attempt already had been foiled. Salvation from punishment at the hand of the Romans? No, there would be no military retribution, for no prisoners had escaped. The jailer was inquiring of the same salvation which the spirit of divination described (16:17): “*These men are the servants of the most high God, which shew unto us the way of salvation.*” Luke confirms this fact in Paul’s answer to the jailer: “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved*” (16:31).

²³ See *Appendix: Etymology and Semantics*, p 16.

would require “*much water*” or a going down into/coming up out of water, so — taken alone — these documented accounts make a compelling case for immersion.

But we need not rely on anecdotal evidence alone: as we have seen, the symbolism of complete immersion into water is also significant. Christian baptism typifies death, burial and resurrection from a grave, precisely replaying the pattern of Christ’s crucifixion, burial and resurrection (Romans 6:3-7; Colossians 2:11-12). There simply is no mistaking the imagery: only immersion can be understood to reflect the clearly-intended symbolism.

Who is to be baptized? This question lies at the heart of the credo/paedobaptism debate: should baptism be reserved for believers (credobaptism), or should infants be baptized (paedobaptism)? As we have seen, baptism in Scripture is inextricably linked to belief in Christ Jesus.²⁴ Believer’s baptism accords with the gospel, which teaches that the objective work of God in salvation necessarily leads to the subjective response of faith. As the work of God in Christ secures a believing response in His people, the ordinance of baptism — a sign of the new covenant — is applied only to those who evidence by their belief their membership in the covenant of grace. When churches practice paedobaptism or allow into membership those baptized [only] as infants, they sunder the clear biblical connection between faith and baptism.²⁵

Paedobaptists commonly appeal to household conversions in support of their position, reasoning that infants must have been included. But in Luke’s record, belief is clear. Of the eight conversion narratives he documents, four — the accounts of Cornelius, Lydia, the Philippian jailer and Crispus — involve entire household conversions. Three explicitly record belief. Luke tells us that Cornelius “*with all his house*” (10:2) “*believed on the Lord Jesus Christ*” (11:17). Paul and Silas preach to the Philippian jailer “*and to all that were in his house*” (16:32) so that the entire household, “*believing in God*” (16:34), were baptized. Even in the abbreviated account of Crispus we see that all in the house believed and were baptized (18:8). Only in the story of Lydia’s conversion (16:14-15) is there no explicit mention that all in the house believed; yet even here belief is to be understood, since baptism implies repentance, and repentance, belief.

Who baptizes, and under what authority? As we saw earlier, Christ’s commission (Matthew 28:18-20) is predicated upon the Father’s having granted all authority to the Son, who confers missionary authority onto His disciples (collectively, the church). If there is any doubt that authority flows *to* – not *from* – the church, Paul’s letter to the Galatians settles the matter. Following his departure from the region, some zealous judaizers pushed into the churches, leading their lapse into a works-based theology. “*I marvel,*” Paul writes them, “*that you are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ...*” (1:6). The false teachers disputed Paul’s apostleship, boasting that they were the *true* descendants of Abraham and the *true* ministers of Christ, having learned from the apostles themselves; they strayed so far from

²⁴ Belief is *explicitly* associated with baptism in Mark 16:16, and in several instances in Acts: 8:12-13; 8:37; 10:43; 16:31-34; 18:8; and 19:4. The association is *understood* in virtually every other context, including Acts 3:38-41, Romans 6:3-4 and Colossians 2:11-12, and *many others*.

²⁵ Paedobaptism also suggests a sacramental view that water baptism confers saving grace onto the baptized infant. As we saw earlier, Peter in his Epistle debunks this notion (1 Peter 3:18-22).

Paul's teachings as to require that gentile converts take steps to appear as Jews outwardly (i.e., become circumcised) to validate their standing with God. But in recalling his own experience, Paul shows that such validating authority does not flow from a church: when God called him to preach to the gentiles, Paul "*conferred not with flesh and blood: Neither... went up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me*" (1:16, 17); his authority came from Christ (1:1). To hold that church or denominational sanction is required to validate or authenticate evangelism is to create a roadblock for the gospel.

As to the administrator, the biblical testimony is nonspecific: neither by explicit instruction nor by example does the Bible teach that a particular administrator is essential for a valid baptism. We find occasions where individuals are chosen and directed by God to minister the word to others: Philip was sent to the Ethiopian; Ananias, to Saul of Tarsus; and Peter, to Cornelius. But except for the record of Philip's baptizing the eunuch, we are left to suppose the participation of the ones sent. In the remaining narratives we similarly presume that those ministering the word also baptize: Peter, at Pentecost and for Cornelius' household; Philip, for the Samaritans; Ananias, for Saul of Tarsus; and Paul, for Lydia's and the Philippian jailer's households. We find no particular office or capacity associated with the administration of baptism: we see nondescript disciples of Jesus (John 4:1-2), one of the twelve Apostles (Peter), a self-described apostle²⁶ (Paul), a disciple at Damascus (Ananias), and a deacon (Philip) all administering rite. Though Paul personally baptized Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas (1 Corinthians 1:14, 16), he did not consider baptism a central part of his ministry (1 Corinthians 1:14). What we can assert is that — perfectly in keeping with the *Great Commission* — all recorded Christian baptisms have disciples baptizing believers.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LOCAL CHURCH

"The catholic or universal church, which... may be called invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ...."²⁷ Individual local churches are the *visible* body of Christ, representative and reflective of this universal church, and responsible to execute the commission of Christ. They are congregations of baptized believers, whose members "are saints by calling, visibly manifesting and evidencing... their obedience unto that call of Christ...."²⁸

Baptism and Church Membership

As a local church is comprised of baptized believers, baptism and church membership are necessarily related. To require baptism for membership is to continue to establish clear borders for the church — to define her as a congregation of believers. Yet baptism and church membership are not synonymous.

Too often following a gospel sermon we hear an invitation for parishioners to *join the church*. Though this phrase is arguably shorthand for *making a public profession of repentance and faith in Christ*, we suggest that an appeal in these or similar words downplays the gospel message, undercuts the theology

²⁶ Romans 1:1; 11:13; Galatians 2:8.

²⁷ 1689 London Baptist Confession, Chapter 26, ¶1.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, Chapter 26, ¶6.

of baptism, and blurs the distinction between baptism and church membership. Submitting to baptism is *not* joining a local church.²⁹ It is a demonstrable confession of sinfulness, repentance and faith, a visible uniting with Christ (Romans 6:3) *through* the local church, which Jesus commissioned to disciple, to baptize and to teach (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Administration of Baptism

Though we find no particular instruction as to who in the church should administer the rite, we know that “*God is not the author of confusion*” and that all things should “*be done decently and in order*” (1 Corinthians 14:33, 40). To this end, it is prudent to have someone that well represents the congregation as a whole performing baptisms; generally, this is the pastor or another elder.

Baptism should occur as soon as possible after the time of conversion so as to underscore the biblical pattern. When possible, it should be performed before witnesses,³⁰ normally in the presence of the local congregation, whose witnessing this punctuation of the penitent’s conversion experience bolsters their own faith.

Within the worship context, baptism should be performed so as to underscore its association with repentance and belief. Even if the service is considered a special congregational gathering, baptism should not be separated from the proclamation of the gospel where it could be misconstrued by an observer as a sacrament. Within a worship service, baptism is best understood when it follows the preaching of God’s word.

Baptismal Validity

Water baptism (loosely defined) is nearly universally accepted across Christendom, yet profound and nuanced differences in understanding and practice pervade both the broader kingdom context and — to a lesser degree — our own Primitive Baptist community. This presents a fundamental dilemma: what baptism(s) should a congregation consider valid?

Historically, Baptist treatment of this issue has been as varied as Baptists themselves. Landmark Baptists represent one end of the spectrum, holding that only *true* churches can perform valid baptisms, and narrowly defining what constitutes a *true* church. On the other hand, many Baptists have accepted baptisms from others as long as the candidates were believers. Plotted on this scale, most Primitive Baptists would cluster near the Landmark position on this issue.

A single passage is typically referenced to support the traditional Primitive Baptist position that membership petitioners with invalid (i.e., non-Primitive Baptist) baptisms require rebaptism:

²⁹ Typically when a believer is baptized, he also unites with the congregation that baptized him. In the event that a believer requests baptism and demonstrates repentance and faith to the church’s satisfaction, but for some reason asks not to become a member of that local body, he should be baptized and lovingly encouraged to become a vital part of another local church community. Cf. The Ethiopian eunuch, Acts 2:26-39.

³⁰ We consider Philip’s private baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch to be exceptional in this regard.

And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper coasts came to Ephesus: and finding certain disciples, He said unto them, Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed? And they said unto him, We have not so much as heard whether there be any Holy Ghost. And he said unto them, Unto what then were ye baptized? And they said, Unto John's baptism. Then said Paul, John verily baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on him which should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus. When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. And when Paul had laid his hands upon them, the Holy Ghost came on them; and they spake with tongues, and prophesied. And all the men were about twelve. (Acts 19:1-7)

Here we find a group of twelve believing disciples whom Paul queried as to their having received the Holy Ghost, that special Spirit outpouring visibly manifesting God's sanction and authentication on the work of establishing His church. But though they had been baptized "*unto John's baptism,*" they had never even heard of the Holy Ghost.³¹ Paul reminds these believers that John called upon "*the people to believe on him that should come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus.*" And "*when they heard this, they were baptized*" (19:5). This is the sticking point: who are *they*? Those who believe this passage records a rebaptism contend that *they* in this verse refers to the twelve men Paul is now addressing; those who do not, that *they* refers to the people John was calling to repentance and belief. We hold the latter, yet concede that it is impossible to definitively know from the text (both the Greek and English are completely ambiguous on this point). But it is the gift of the Holy Ghost, not baptism, which is the point of this passage.

We are left, then, with a single passage whose mention of baptism is secondary, and which *perhaps* sanctions rebaptism. We consider it at best unwise to base such a significant practice as rebaptism in the mouth of a single, disputed witness.

Though our position on this issue represents a departure from modern, prevalent Primitive Baptist practice,³² we believe that to deny the validity of a baptism which in every way comports with Scripture serves to divide the body of Christ and to contravene the clear teachings of Paul, who went to extraordinary lengths to promote unity in the body. We therefore count as valid any Christian baptism [by immersion] of a confessing, repentant sinner performed in the name of Christ.³³

³¹ Evidently these twelve men were not baptized *by* John: it would be difficult to conceive that a group of people familiar with John's teaching would be unaware of the Holy Spirit, for this was fundamental to John's ministry.

³² We appreciate the sensitive nature of our difference from the majority of Primitive Baptists on this issue and wish not to make this matter a test of fellowship: to any who differ, we extend charity and appeal to theirs.

³³ There will of course be unanticipated questions and irregularities in this practice, which the body will have to address. For instance, no congregation could judge today whether a membership petitioner was truly repentant at the time of his baptism; for this we would likely rely on the petitioner's testimony and personal conscience. Similarly, we should not expect any baptismal candidate to have a mature understanding of baptismal theology at the time of conversion. What we *would* expect of any membership petitioner is subscription to our statement of beliefs and a willing, teachable spirit.

SUMMARY

Though biblical baptism is understood and practiced within certain parameters,³⁴ baptism itself is never the point. Baptism is an abstract of our faith. It is a confession of sin, a demonstration of repentance, a profession of faith in Christ. It reminds us of Christ's humiliation and death, and of His resurrection from the dead. It portrays the radical nature of conversion and previews the bodily resurrection. It identifies us with Him as we renounce a former way of living and commit to a new. Baptism points us to Christ, who for us came, "...*was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification*" (Romans 4:25). All this is encapsulated in baptism. *This is the point.*

³⁴ We endorse the baptism-relevant positions penned in the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith (and later affirmed in the 1900 Fulton Kentucky Primitive Baptist Confession) as an apt summary of our own, namely:

Chapter 28: Of Baptism and the Lord's Supper

1. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances of positive and sovereign institution, appointed by the Lord Jesus, the only lawgiver, to be continued in his church to the end of the world. (*Matthew 28:19, 20; 1 Corinthians 11:26*)
2. These holy appointments are to be administered by those only who are qualified and thereunto called, according to the commission of Christ. (*Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 4:1*)

Chapter 29: Of Baptism

1. Baptism is an ordinance of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, to be unto the party baptized, a sign of his fellowship with him, in his death and resurrection; of his being engrafted into him; of remission of sins; and of giving up into God, through Jesus Christ, to live and walk in newness of life. (*Romans 6:3-5; Colossians 2:12; Galatians 3:27; Mark 1:4; Acts 22:16; Romans 6:4*)
2. Those who do actually profess repentance towards God, faith in, and obedience to, our Lord Jesus Christ, are the only proper subjects of this ordinance. (*Mark 16:16; Acts 8:36, 37; Acts 2:41; Acts 8:12; Acts 18:8*)
3. The outward element to be used in this ordinance is water, wherein the party is to be baptized, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. (*Matthew 28:19, 20; Acts 8:38*)
4. Immersion, or dipping of the person in water, is necessary to the due administration of this ordinance. (*Matthew 3:16; John 3:23*)

APPENDIX: ETYMOLOGY AND SEMANTICS

There are two closely related verbs for *baptize* used in the Greek New Testament: βαπτω (*baptō*) and its intensive derivative βαπτίζω (*baptizō*). Though both may be loosely defined *to dip* or *to immerse*, the words are differently translated into the King James English. The root (*baptō*) appears in only three passages,³⁵ each translated *to dip*; all other instances, whether referencing literal or metaphorical immersion, are transliterated³⁶ *to baptize*.

James Strong confirms this rendering in his *Greek Dictionary of the New Testament*.³⁷

[911] βαπτω (*baptō*) *to whelm*, i.e., cover wholly with a fluid; in the N.T. only in a qualified or special sense, i.e. (literally) *to moisten* (a part of one's person), or (by implication) *to stain* (as with dye): — dip.

[907] βαπτίζω (*baptizō*). *To make whelmed* (i.e., *fully wet*); used only (in the N.T.) of ceremonial *ablution*, especially (technically) of the ordinance of Christian *baptism*: — baptist, baptize, wash.

When there is uncertainty or ambiguity surrounding an ancient word's usage or shades of meaning, etymologists often turn to contemporary writings for clarification. For *baptō* and *baptizō*, Greek literature validates the King James usage and translation in

a text from the Greek poet and physician Nicander, who lived about 200 B.C. It is a recipe for making pickles, and it is helpful because it uses both words. Nicander says that to make a pickle, the vegetable should first be “dipped” (*baptō*) into boiling water and then “baptized” (*baptizō*) in the vinegar solution.³⁸

As we move from ancient Greek times to Renaissance-era England, we see no evolution in the understanding of these words. The first English Bible — the Wycliffe translation — was published c. 1384, more than two hundred years prior to the King James translation. Already by this time, *baptize* was sufficiently established in the Middle English that the Wycliffe translators wholly embraced it:

And Jhesus cam ny, and spak to hem, and seide, Al power in heuene and in erthe is youun to me. Therfor go ye, and teche alle folkis, baptyng hem in the name of the Fadir, and of the Sone, and of the Hooli Goost; techyng hem to kepe alle thingis, what euer thingis Y haue comaundid to you; and lo! Y am with you in alle daies, in to the ende of the world. (Matheu 28:18-20)

Therfor what schulen we seie? Schulen we dwelle in synne, that grace be plenteuouse? God forbede. For hou schulen we that ben deed to synne, lyue yit ther ynne? Whether, britheren, ye knowen not, that whiche euere we ben baptyd in Crist Jhesu, we ben baptyd in his deth? For we ben togidere biried with hym bi baptyng in to deth; that as Crist aroos fro deth bi the glorie of the fadir, so walke we in a newnesse of lijf. (Romynges 6:1-4)

What did the King James translators understand *baptize* to mean when they used it? In their [now seldom-printed] preface, the translators are careful to point out that they have “avoided the

³⁵ Luke 16:24; John 13:26; Revelation 19:13.

³⁶ The English verb *baptize* and the noun *baptism* were anglicized in the thirteenth century.

³⁷ Strong, James, S.T.D, LL.D. *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* Iowa Falls, IA: Riverside Book and Bible House, 1986.

³⁸ Boice, James Montgomery. *Romans: An Expository Commentary, Volume 2: The Reign of Grace (Romans 5:1 – 8:39)* Grand Rapids MI: Baker Book House, 1982, p659.

scrupulosity of the Puritans who leave the old ecclesiastical words, and betake them to other, as when they put *washing* for *baptism*....”³⁹ It is clear from this statement that had the translators held to sprinkling or pouring they would have used *wash/washing* instead of *baptize/baptism*. Yet they chose the latter because they wanted to employ words fitly expressive of the [biblical] Anglican concept of baptism by immersion.

When the King James translation was published in 1611, *baptize* already had been language-entrenched for hundreds of years and had been used in previous English Bible translations. When the King James translators chose this word, there was no question or ambiguity about its meaning: *baptism* was understood as synonymous with *immersion*.⁴⁰

³⁹ *The Translators to the Reader*, Preface to the King James Version 1611, “Reasons Inducing Us Not to Stand Curiously Upon an Identity of Phrasing.”

⁴⁰ We can also look to a number of pre-1611 confessions of faith squaring with their adherents’ documented understanding of baptism as immersion for believers only. For example:

- **Anabaptists:** *Waldenses Confessions* (1120 and 1544); *Schleitheim Confession* (Swiss Brethren, 1527); *Ridemann’s Rechenschaft Confession* (1540).
- **English Baptists/Separatists:** *Short Confession in XX Articles* (John Smyth, 1609); *A Short Confession* (Helwys, 1610).