

**Zeitschrift:** Theologische Zeitschrift  
**Herausgeber:** Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel  
**Band:** 14 (1958)  
**Heft:** 4

**Artikel:** Aspects of Baptism in the New Testament  
**Autor:** Torrance, Thomas F.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878933>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 02.02.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## Aspects of Baptism in the New Testament.

### 1.

All the four Gospels take time to speak about *John the Baptist* before they offer us any account of the ministry and teaching of Christ, and they are concerned to show the very close relation between the mission of John, preparatory though it was, and the mission of Christ the Son of God and Servant of the Lord. That connexion is nowhere more evident than in regard to Baptism, which had been given such a central and significant role in the ministry and message of John, as Baptism into repentant preparation for the coming of the Christ.<sup>1</sup> John came to be known as the Baptiser not only because Baptism occupied such a central place, but because He administered Baptism. Under him Baptism was no longer to be ministered by the subjects of Baptism to themselves, but was administered to them as passive receivers. As such John's Baptism had a radical character appropriate to his radical message, cutting through all the claims and pretensions of the Jews to the very root of their existence as a people of God, in order to clear the way for the Advent of the Messiah and to prepare for Him a people ready for an entirely new situation. Therefore John summoned the Jews to uproot themselves out of their nationalist existence and to become a people of God again, a pilgrim people expecting to enter into the Messianic country. He stood on the banks of the historic Jordan and pointed the way through the water to the Messianic Kingdom, insisting that it had already drawn near and was about to break in with eschatological swiftness and urgency.

Two facts stand out in the narratives. This Baptism and message proclaimed an uprooting and a radical judgment, but also a new era of the Spirit, and both were to be fulfilled by the Messiah. He would lay the axe to the root of Israel and cleanse the Temple (the threshing floor), but He would also baptise

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. T. F. Torrance, *The Origins of Baptism: Scott. Journ. of Theol.* 11 (1958), pp. 158—171, to which this article is the sequel.

with the Spirit, and a new sort of Abraham's children would be begotten.

Then into the midst of that situation stepped the Messiah Himself, Jesus, to fulfil all righteousness: to fulfil the divine judgment and to fulfil the Covenant-Will of God, to enact the mighty acts of God and so to bring redemption. And it is made clear in various ways that Jesus steps in to do that as the Servant-Son, while His life and work as Servant-Son begins right away with this submission to the Baptism of John.

Thus the *Baptism of Jesus* is regarded as one of the mighty acts of the Gospel, one of the saving acts inaugurating the Kingdom, for with it the Heavens were opened and the power of the Spirit descended upon Christ, the acknowledged Servant-Son, and the language of that acknowledgment from the Father to the Son indicates the nature and character of the relationship to God which such Baptism involved. The language of the Evangelical narratives appears to recall that of the Testament of Levi (18): "The heavens shall be opened and from the temple of glory shall come upon him sanctification, with the Father's voice as from Abraham to Isaac. And the glory of the Most High shall be uttered over him, and the Spirit of understanding and sanctification shall rest upon him." At any rate in His Baptism Jesus was clearly consecrated and anointed as the Christ and sent out to fulfil His Mission as the Son of God on earth. He was immediately thrust into the wilderness where He who had just been baptised in solidarity with sinners with the Baptism into repentance, fasted forty days and nights, humbly submitted Himself (Son of God though He was) as one of us to the will of His Father. It was then that He was tempted and entered upon His redemptive work, being obedient to the will of God where we were disobedient, and offering throughout the whole course of His life an offering of obedience well pleasing to the Father—all on our behalf, that in Him we might be brought to the obedience of the faith and become children of the heavenly Father.

When we examine the Gospel records, the Fourth and the Synoptic Gospels alike, we discover that none of them gives an account of John the Baptist, of his message or of his baptismal rite, apart from the transformation of John's Baptism

that took place in Jesus' submission to it. They all interpret John's Baptism from the perspective of Christ's Baptism by John, and indeed of His death and resurrection and His gift of the Spirit. This is much more in evidence in the Fourth Gospel than in the others, but the principle is the same in all of them. So interpreted, John's Baptism is the beginning of the Gospel, and they actually use of it the distinctive word, βάπτισμα, used only in Christian literature, and not used of John's Baptism outside the New Testament (e.g. by Josephus). Βάπτισμα was clearly coined to speak of Christian Baptism, but was therefore applied rightly to John's Baptism, for his Baptism was not only into the name of the Coming One, the Christ, but it was the Baptism of Jesus by John which transformed John's rite of Baptism into Christian Baptism.

There can surely be no doubt about the fact that *John the Baptist* supplied the Church with its *ritual act*, the rite of initiation by water into the Messianic Age and Community, into the New Covenant, while the origins of that rite lie apparently along the line we have been tracing out. But *the doctrine* of Baptism is determined not by any Old Testament typology, nor by ideas derived from Judaism, but only by the event of *Christ's Baptism* and by all it involved for Him on our behalf.

To this assertion, however, a qualification requires to be made. There are points in the rite of Christian baptism in which it is modified or determined by the doctrine of the saving event in Christ, and there are points in the doctrine where the exposition of it makes fundamental use of the pattern of the rite of Baptism.

Thus, for example, the Christian rite of Baptism derives from John the Baptist, but the form of that rite is determined by the event that took place in the Baptism of Jesus. He went into the water to be baptised by John, but in His doing that the Spirit came down upon Him and, as Jesus claimed, anointed Him. That gave Christian Baptism a *double form*, not only as Baptism in water from below, but as Baptism in heavenly water from above, that is in the Spirit. The Semitic language lying behind this—*mayim* = water, and *shamayim* = heaven, with all the Old Testament teaching it involved, particularly from Ezekiel—is reflected all through the literature and practice of the



Early Church, and not without reason. This twofold character of Baptism was reinforced at Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out in Baptism upon the Church, and immediately the Apostles summoned men and women, with their children, to be baptised in water, calling upon God, and entering into the fulfilment of His promise to pour out His Spirit upon mankind. A typical text describing this double character of Baptism which reflects the two-fold character in the rite is found in Titus 3. 5: "According to His mercy He saved us, through *washing* (or *laver*) of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit which He *poured out upon* us richly through Christ Jesus our Saviour . . ."

On the other hand, the doctrine of Baptism is expounded in the New Testament after the pattern of the rite. In the ritual act of Baptism there was a descent into the water and an ascent out of it—language which really derives not from the Gnostic myths, but ultimately from the Old Testament Cult, but possibly immediately from proselyte Baptism. In the New Testament this language was applied to the doctrine of Christ, not only to speak of His death and resurrection, but also to speak of His incarnation and ascension—the descent and ascent of the Son of Man. There is every reason to declare that that was the primary usage of this language, found according to the Fourth Gospel, on the lips of Christ Himself in His discourse with Nicodemus. In other words, "the baptismal language" of descent and ascent applies fundamentally to the descent of the Son of God into our mortal humanity and to His ascension to the right hand of the Father. It is only by a false abstraction that this language is applied to Baptism with reference only to the death and resurrection of Christ, and not also to His incarnation and ascension, all for us and our salvation. Certainly the Early Church regarded His Baptism in the Jordan not as His adoption to be the Son of God, but as His manifestation and public consecration as God's Son pointing back to His birth from above of the Spirit, and regarded as the counterpart to His ascent out of the Jordan and His receiving of the Spirit when the heavens were opened over Him, for our sakes, as having its fulfilled counterpart in His ascension to open the Kingdom of Heaven to all baptised into His Name, and to pour

out upon them the fulness of His Spirit. Thus Baptism, like the redemptive work of Christ, must be related to the whole course of His obedient life, to His Person, and to the whole act of His divine condescension to our estate and exaltation of us in Himself to the Father. We cannot be true to the whole teaching of the New Testament unless we consider Baptism in its essential context.

## 2.

But now we must turn to look at *the word* which the New Testament uses to speak of this—βάπτισμα. We have not paid sufficient attention to the fact that it is a new word that is used, and not the word βαπτισμός (found only in the New Testament, in Mark. 7. 4, and Hebrews 6. 2, to describe rites of ablution). Βάπτισμα must surely be understood in close proximity to κήρυγμα as referring to the mighty acts of God in Christ that are proclaimed in the Word and Sacrament—the content of *baptisma* is the same as the content of *kerygma*, but while it is the Self-proclamation of Christ that lies behind the *kerygma*, it is the Self-consecration of Christ that lies behind the *baptisma*, and as in the Church's *kerygma* it is Christ Himself who acts and is mighty to save, so in the Church's *baptisma* it is Christ Himself who acts confirming His Word and sealing His work of salvation. Even in the preparatory ministry of John the Baptist, κηρύσσειν and βαπτίζειν were conjoined, so it is also in the ministry of the apostles, *baptisma* follows their *kerygma* and is given, not as the seal of faith, but as the seal of the Word of the Gospel, for faith cannot be the content of the *baptisma* any more than it can be the content of the *kerygma*, although both require faith.

This interpretation is reinforced by the fact that nowhere does the New Testament offer us a description of the rite of Baptism. It is not interested in the rite as such, but in the event behind the rite, nor is it interested in the human minister of the rite, but in the One who fulfilled the Will of God and ordained the rite as the seal of His command and promise. It is not of course that the New Testament regards the rite itself with indifference, but that the rite is to be used like a window through which we look to something beyond it altogether. Just as we

do not normally when looking out of the window look at the window-pane (except to note on occasion how far its imperfection distorts our vision), as we look through a window-pane without noticing it: so it is with the New Testament *baptisma*. Just as *kerygma* does not call attention to the preacher or the preaching but only to Christ Himself: so *baptisma* by its very nature does not direct attention to itself as a rite (that would be as *baptismos*) or to him who administers it, but directs us at once beyond to Christ Himself and to what He has done on our behalf, that is to the objective and fulfilled reality. This being so, it might be best for us to speak precisely of *baptismatic* rather than 'baptismal' relation to Christ. We do speak of 'baptismal ingrafting into Christ', of 'baptismal dying and rising with Him', and of 'baptismal regeneration', and we are in so doing using a sacramental mode of speaking, but the difficulty about this language is that no matter how much the emphasis is laid upon Christ Himself, some foolish people will always take it to mean that it is the rite of baptism which ingrafts or regenerates us, or that it is actually in the experience of the rite that we die and rise again with Christ, which can only mean that they think of this ingrafting or regenerating or dying and rising as acts in addition to what has already taken place in Christ on our behalf, and therefore already been fulfilled in us in Him. The New Testament nowhere teaches us that there is a saving act in addition to that which has once and for all taken place in Christ and for us in Him. There is only one Jesus Christ, the historical Jesus Christ who does not have to be made present, but who is actually present with us to the end of the world; so there is only one mighty saving event (that is, all the mighty acts of God that took place in the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ), which is ever present with us, availing and effective and operative for us because we have already been involved in it, for it took place on our behalf in Christ. The event is inseparable from the Person of Christ, and it is Christ in His life-act, Christ with His mighty acts wrought out for us, who is always present with us to the end of the world, so that when in His Name we proclaim the *kerygma* and administer the *baptisma*, it is actually Christ Himself, really and fully present, who acts savingly in

His Church, revealing Himself and baptising with His Spirit. Only when we learn to get behind the false stress upon our own subjectivity in *kerygma* and *baptisma* can we fully appreciate the teaching of the New Testament, and at the same time fully understand the royal freedom for faith that both *kerygma* and *baptisma* involve.

## 3.

But now we must speak more precisely of *the baptismatic event*. To do that we must return to consider the Baptism of Jesus Himself, and that means to return to the start of His ministry in His submission to John's Baptism. That great event pointed back to His own birth from above of the Spirit, an aspect particularly stressed in the first three chapters of the Fourth Gospel, but it also pointed forward to His death on the Cross, an aspect also stressed by the Fourth Gospel, but particularly stressed by the Synoptic Gospels. It may be better to consider the latter first.

a) The relation of the Baptism of Jesus to His *Crucifixion*.

As we have already seen, the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan is to be regarded as the consecration to His mission as Suffering Servant. It was Baptism into His vicarious work. It was of course His consecration both as Victim and as Priest in one act—a theme of the Fourth Gospel, which speaks of Jesus as the Lamb of God, bearing the sins of the world, and also as the Son, consecrated and sent by the Father and endowed with the Spirit without measure. But this mission of Christ is presented primarily in the Gospels in terms of His Servant-ministry. He was baptised into a life of vicarious passion, in which He went forth to bear our sins and sicknesses throughout the whole course of His public life, right up to the Cross and there above all, but it was in all that a Baptism into His obedience to the Father's Will, obedience as the Son of God within the conditions of our estranged and alienated Humanity, and obedience unto the death of the Cross. It was thus into the Cross that He was baptised, so that His Baptism came to its fulfilment in His crucifixion. But between His Baptism in water in the Jordan and His Baptism in blood on the Cross, His whole ser-

vant-existence and obedience was His Baptism, for throughout the whole course of His obedience He was enacting the Will of God in our flesh, and doing that on our behalf. "I have a baptism with which I am being baptised" (Mark. 10. 38 f.), He said, with reference to the work which He was accomplishing, and with which He was sorely pressed until it was finally accomplished.

It is sometimes said that by the Baptism with which He was being baptised Jesus was speaking metaphorically or figuratively of His death, and His words contain no reference to Baptism as a rite at all. Those who say that make the mistake of thinking that by βάπτισμα the New Testament means βαπτισμός, and fail to see the dimension of objectivity in which the New Testament always uses this term. But they make another mistake—they give the word βάπτισμα in this saying a meaning which it nowhere possesses in all Greek literature. The verb βαπτίζω is used often in Greek, and several times in the Septuagint, only metaphorically, to speak of drowning or dying, but nowhere is the word βάπτισμα so used. Thus to give this use of 'baptism' by Jesus only a figurative meaning, they have the impossible linguistic task of proving that in this instance only it must be so interpreted, while in all other instances it is used of Baptism. Of course Baptism contains a figurative element, but the association of βάπτισμα with βαπτίζω here is clearly more than a Semitism; it is designed to drive home with the use of the specific and distinctive word coined by the Church for Baptism, the fact that Christ deliberately linked His Baptism in the Jordan with His death on the Cross, and with the whole course of His ministry in obedience and passion on our behalf, and thereby also to drive home the fact that our Baptism in the Name of Christ is a covenanted consociation with Him in all He did to fulfil righteousness from His Baptism in the Jordan to His crucifixion on the Cross. In our Baptism we are drawn within the range of His vicarious work in life and death, and are consecrated to God the Father in His Self-consecration on our behalf.

We must say, then, that Christ's vicarious Baptism was His whole living passion, culminating in His death, His Baptism in blood, once and for all accomplished on the Cross. That is

the objective event, the One Baptismatic Event in Christ that lies behind every administration of Baptism, the all-inclusive ἐν βάπτισμα that is the primary fact referred to every time the word Baptism is used by the New Testament. But this objective event has a subjective counterpart, in the Baptism of the Spirit at Pentecost. At the Jordan, Jesus wearing our humanity, was baptised and anointed for us; at the Cross, suffering in our humanity, He was baptised for us in judgment and death; and in the resurrection He was clothed with power and raised for our justification. On the ground of His whole atoning act in life and death and resurrection, He ascended to pour out His Spirit once and for all upon human flesh, upon the Church, giving it to share in His one Baptism.

We have not made sufficient of the essential relation between atonement and Pentecost, and of the fact that the Spirit was poured out only after Christ had been glorified. Melito of Sardis sought to expound this by relating the shedding of blood to the release of the life or spirit, thus laying stress upon the pouring out of Christ's Spirit as well as the pouring out of His blood as the atoning event. It is also evident that the Jewish Community at Qumran related the atonement in the New Covenant to the work of the Spirit. Whether these particular ideas played a part in the minds of the New Testament writers or not, it is clear that as they thought of the Baptism in the Jordan as one of His mighty acts, bringing in the Kingdom of Heaven, so they thought of His ascension and His pouring out of the Spirit in Baptism upon the Church as a mighty act of redemption and salvation. This was not a new act or something that had to be added to what He had already done, as if that were incomplete, but it was rather the full actualisation of His redemption in the midst of His people on earth. In the language of Melito of Sardis, the Church was not only sealed with the Blood of the Covenant, but sealed with the Spirit, and indeed both these are one and the same redemptive event.

Thus we have to say that the great baptismatic event includes the once and for all Baptism of Blood on the Cross, and the once and for all Baptism of the Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost. There is One Baptism, and One Body common to



Christ and His Church, but each participates in it differently—Christ actively and vicariously as Redeemer, the Church passively and receptively as the redeemed Community. This baptismal event is essentially corporate in Christ and in His Church—it is corporate because the Church was already included as ‘the many’ in ‘the One’ who suffered and died on their behalf. “Except a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone”, but in dying this One became many, for He gave His life a ransom for many. That is why the New Testament can speak of the work of Christ as for the Church, although it was also for the world. “He loved the Church and gave Himself up for it, that He might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle, but that it should be holy and without blemish» (Eph. 5. 25 f.). It is only within that One Baptism of Christ for the Church and of the Church in Himself that the administration of Baptism to individuals has its proper place. In other words, it is only through and within the Church, created by the corporate Baptism of the Spirit at Pentecost and drawn and established within the fulfilment of the Covenant-will of God, in the obedient life and death of Christ, that, when from generation to generation the Church in obedience to Christ’s command baptises in water, others are added to the Church, that they may share in what has already taken place for them, and live in the power of the Name of Christ, as members of His Body which was crucified for them and raised again in justification for them. Thus the Baptism of the individual, child or adult, is not a new Baptism, but an initiation into, and a sharing in, the One Baptism common to Christ and His Church, wrought out in Christ alone, but bestowed upon the Church as it is yoked together with Him through the Baptism of the Spirit.

b) The relation of the Baptism of Jesus to the *Incarnation*.

Here we come to a much neglected line of teaching in the New Testament. Some people appear to have difficulty in accepting Matthew 28. 19 as the authentic words of Christ: “Go

ye into all the world and disciple all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." The textual authorities for this verse are overwhelmingly strong, so that doubt about it can only be on purely *a priori* grounds, in a refusal to believe that the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit could be brought together like that on the lips of Jesus. But hesitation in that way must arise from a myopic reading of the Gospels, the Synoptic and the Fourth Gospels, for all through them we have to do with the relation of the Son to the Father and with the presence and power of the Spirit. That is nowhere more clear than at the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, where we have the voice of the Father in address to the Son, along with the manifestation of the Spirit. Perhaps it is only when we fail to give the Baptism of Jesus by John its full and proper place in Christian Baptism, and so make a false abstraction of Baptism from the whole course of Christ's ministry from the Jordan to the Resurrection, that we find difficulty with thinking of Matthew 28. 19 as our Lord's own direct command. Although it has always been to that verse that the Church has looked for its dominical warrant for Baptism, Baptism is grounded upon the whole life of Christ, going back to His Baptism, and even to His birth of the Spirit.

But here we must pause to think of the significance of Baptism into the Name of the Holy Trinity. It means that we are not baptised in the name of Christ alone, but equally into the name of the Father and of the Spirit. Therefore Baptism cannot be interpreted exclusively as Baptism into the death of Christ, for neither was the Father crucified for us, nor did the Spirit become incarnate on our behalf. Baptism in the three-fold name is a rite essentially appropriate to the trinitarian character of the baptismatic event, which includes throughout it the relation of the Son to the Father through the Spirit. Baptism is thus concerned with the act of the Father in sending His Son, with eternal love which He has poured out upon us in the Incarnation of His Son, that through Him we might be adopted into sonship and assumed into fellowship with the Fa-



ther. But Baptism is also concerned with the work of the Spirit through whom Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, by whom He was anointed as the Christ at His Baptism, through whom He cast out demons, and brought the Kingdom to bear redemptively upon the needs of men, through whom again He offered Himself without spot to the Father, and according to whom He was raised from the dead by the Father. It was this same Spirit whom Christ after His ascension as the Son to the right hand of the Father, poured out upon His Church, renewing His people in the power of the resurrection, giving them to share in all that He had done for them, and enabling them to cry, in echo of His own Word, *Abba Father*. Baptism in the Name of God the Creator and the Father is the seal of His Covenant promise to be our Father, and Baptism in the Name of the Spirit is the actualisation of that promise, the sealing of us as belonging to the Father, the creative renewing of us as His children. In that inseparable relation with Baptism in the Name of the Father and Spirit, Baptism in the Name of Christ has direct reference to His birth on earth as the Son of the Father, to the whole course of His obedience, as well as to His death and resurrection, and it also has reference to the ascension of the Son to the Father, where He stands in for us as our Surety and Advocate, and where He confesses us as His brothers, and presents us to the Father as His sons.

What I wish to stress here is the much neglected fact that Baptism has essential reference to the whole incarnational event, to the coming of the Son of God into our mortal humanity, to His whole life of obedient self-oblation, well-pleasing to the Father, and to His ascension in which, wearing our humanity, He brought back with Him many sons unto glory. As we have already noted, the language of descent and ascent used to speak of the death and resurrection of Christ, is also used to speak of His descent into our mortal humanity, and His ascent in our resurrected humanity to the right hand of God. Thus behind Baptism into Christ there lies the whole Incarnation and Ascension of the Son of God, spoken of as the descent and ascent of the Son of Man. Ultimately the sacrament of Baptism is grounded in the Incarnation in which the eternal Son immersed Himself in our mortal human life and assumed us into

oneness with Himself, that He might heal us and through the whole course of His obedience, reconcile us to the Father.

The significance of this will be apparent if we say that while Baptism is usually spoken of only as the sacrament of our incorporation into Christ, it is ultimately grounded upon the fact that in Jesus the Son of God incorporated Himself into our humanity. It is indeed only because of the union with us effected in His incarnation that we can be given to share in all that He has done in our humanity on our behalf, and so have part in His vicarious death and resurrection. If Baptism as a sacrament of the death and resurrection of Christ is detached or abstracted from this primary fact of His incorporation into us in the Incarnation, then Baptism too easily becomes the sacramental mystery of a timeless dying and rising known also to the Semitic and Hellenistic religious mysteries. It was precisely this that the Early Church resisted, and they did so by grounding Baptism upon *the whole* of the New Testament witness to Christ the Incarnate Son, and not simply upon Romans 6. That is to say, alongside the important fact that Baptism is the Sacrament of the death and resurrection of Christ, they laid the important fact that Baptism is the Sacrament of the Incarnation, the Sacrament of the Nativity, as it was sometimes called. In Baptism we are adopted to be sons of God the Father; we are born again of water and of the Spirit—but this is grounded in the Birth of Jesus of the Holy Spirit from above, for it was in and with His Birth as well as in and with His Resurrection that the regeneration (παλιγγενεσία) of our humanity was brought about. In the language used earlier, there are not two acts of regeneration, incorporation, etc., but only one, that which has already been wrought out in Jesus Christ, and in which we are given to share through the Spirit, so that it is in Christ that we are born again through sharing in His birth, and it is in Him that we are converted through sharing in His obedient life, and in Him that we are resurrected through sharing in His resurrection. He was not born on earth for His own sake, but for our sake. His birth for our sake was part of His reconciling and redeeming work, and Baptism is grounded primarily upon that basic event, His incorporation into our humanity, and therefore upon His obedience unto the death of

the Cross in expiation of our sin and guilt, and in His resurrection out of our mortality as the New Man.

This is a favourite theme in the Johannine literature in the New Testament. It is apparent in John 1. 12: "To as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God, to them that believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a husband, but of the will of God." All the patristic citations of this verse in the second and early part of the third centuries (Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, etc.) cite this verse in the singular with direct reference to the Virgin birth of Christ, but whether that is the original text (as seems most likely) or not, there is a clear indirect reference to the fact that we are born again in Christ's miraculous birth. That is the point also of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, that our birth of water and of the Spirit is not a carnal but a spiritual event, from above, and behind it lies the primary reality of Christ's birth; it is He who is the One born from above, for He descended from heaven. Thus what is true of Christ in the reality of His Virgin birth, is true of us also who believe in Him and are baptised into His Name in virtue of the right (ἐξουσία) which He gives us. Again this is the teaching of the Johannine writer in his first Epistle, e.g. in I John 5. 18: "Whosoever has been born of God (ὁ γεννημένος) does not sin, but he who was born of God (γεννηθείς) keeps him." Christ's birth described in the aorist tense was a specific event, but the Christian's birth, described in the perfect tense, is rather the result that accrues from that, more than an event in itself; it is the effect or fruit of that unique event, and is not something in addition to it, but a sharing in it. It is not a new effect therefore, but effect in that it is a participation in a fact that has already taken place.

There is a very definite parallel to this in the teaching of St. Paul about our participation through Baptism in the New Man, the New Adam, the Man from Heaven, the First-Born of all creation, and so of our adoption in Christ through the Spirit who makes us to call upon the Name of the Father like Christ Himself, we are adopted to co-sonship with Christ, and share in His birth and resurrection. That aspect of Pauline teaching which is particularly strong in the Epistle to the Galatians

has to be considered together with the two passages which speak of Baptism as our sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ, found in Romans 6 and Colossians 2.

All this does not mean that we are to neglect the very important aspect of Baptism as the Sacrament of Christ's death and resurrection, but that we must also regard it as a Sacrament of His miraculous birth of the Spirit, and therefore as a sacrament of our regeneration in Him through sharing in His new Humanity. What binds these two aspects together is the simple but often neglected fact that our incorporation into Christ is grounded entirely and primarily upon His incorporation into us. It is moreover, just because He incorporated Himself into our estranged humanity under the divine judgment, and through that incorporation fulfilled that judgment both in His holy life in condemning sin in our flesh, but by submitting and offering our humanity in Himself to the final judgment of God, that Baptism also has an aspect as baptism into judgment and repentance, into the sphere where the Spirit convicts of sin, righteousness and judgment. It is from this point of view that we can see in a new way the integral relation of John's Baptism and message with that of Christ, and understand why Christ began His ministry by proclaiming the same message as John and, it would also appear, by continuing (through His disciples) to administer Baptism and make disciples like John. It is significant that even John the Baptist could speak of God as being able to raise up a new generation through this Baptism into judgment and repentance, just as He could raise up children in Abraham out of the stones lying in the river Jordan. In other words, what we find in the teaching of the New Testament is that the conceptions of birth and death and resurrection are all brought together. It is through Baptism that we are given to share in the death of Christ, but in that way, argued St. Paul, we are made to grow together with Him, in order that we may be resurrected unto newness of life. It is through the Cross, through atonement and reconciliation, that we are given to share in the new life of Man which began with the birth of Jesus and was completely manifested in His resurrection. Just as the atoning work of Christ reached back from His Cross to His birth, or rather reached forward from

His very birth to His Cross, so our sacramental participation in the whole baptismatic event involves a sharing in the birth of Christ and in His death and resurrection, as it reaches out also to the final Parousia when our life, now hid with Christ in God, will be fully unveiled. Apart from our sharing in His death and resurrection, we can have no share in the new life and the humanity begotten in Jesus Christ when He was born of the Virgin Mary, and knit into a life of fellowship with the Father through the obedience of the incarnate Son.

#### 4.

We must now address ourselves briefly to the question of *our relation* as individuals *to the corporate baptismatic event* that has taken place in Christ and is common to Christ and His Church. This perhaps is best approached from the fact that Baptism is the Sacrament of 'the One and the Many', but we may expound that by using the language of *the Covenant*. When God made His Covenant of grace with Abraham, it was none other than the Covenant of grace which He established with the creation of the world, and which took on a redemptive purpose with the rebellion and fall of man. But with Abraham that Covenant assumed a particular form within history and with one race among all the races of mankind, in order that God might prepare within humanity for the fulfilment of His Covenant will for all men. "I will be your God, and you shall be my people." "I will be a God to you and to your seed after you." With such words the Covenant was established in which God willed to be the Father of His people and willed that they should be His children, and He gave them as a seal of this Covenant and its promise of blessing, the sign of circumcision which we have already considered. This Covenant was re-enacted with Israel as a people after its redemption out of Egypt as God's first-born son, and now the Covenant took on more specific shape. "I am holy, be ye also holy." As Head of the Covenant, God required a corresponding holiness from His Covenant-partner, for He willed that His people should live in fellowship with Him and share in His own Holiness. But God knew that His people were unable to fulfil the Covenant, and so in His Fatherly mercy He provided a way with-

in the Covenant of obedient response to Him, and a way of sacrificial worship as a witness to His readiness to cleanse and forgive within the Covenant. The bounds of the Covenant had already been marked out by the rite of circumcision which also indicated that the holy Will of God had to be fulfilled in the flesh of His people and that His promises availed for their seed from generation to generation. But then within these bounds God provided in the Law a revelation of His will, commandments to show the way of obedient conformity to Him, and along with these God furnished in the Cult solemn symbolic indications of the way in which God Himself was ready to provide fulfilment of His Covenant both from His own side and from the side of Israel in all its weakness and frailty. The whole Covenant thus rested upon the divine faithfulness, and pointed ahead to a future in which this divine provision would be translated from the realm of symbolic ritual into the actual existence of His people. The worst thing that could be done with such a Covenant would be to turn the symbolic ritual into an end in itself, as a means of acting upon God and bending His will to serve the ends of men, which is precisely what Israel tried to do again and again, so that God sent the prophets to protest against their use of the Cult, and to demand obedience rather than sacrifice. But with the prophets He also began to reveal more and more His purpose for Messianic fulfilment of His Covenant in a Servant who would not only fulfil the Covenant vicariously, but be the Mediator of a New Covenant in which the Will of God would be written upon the hearts of His people by His Spirit.

That fulfilment we have in Jesus, the chosen Servant-Son, who fulfilled the Covenant both from the side of God and from the side of man, and mediated a New Covenant which set the relations of men with God on a wholly new basis, which is freely proclaimed to all men in the Gospel. It was as a sign and seal to this New Covenant that Baptism was given, not a sign and seal like circumcision of a Covenant yet to be fulfilled in the future, but a sign and seal of a Covenant already fulfilled, once and for all, in Jesus Christ; hence the seal of this Covenant took on a form appropriate to the nature of that which it sealed, an accomplished fact, a finished work, a com-



pleted act of pure grace. But here too the essential pattern of the Covenant remains the same. God wills to be the Father of all men, and enacts a New Covenant in which they are to be His children, but here in sheer grace, and in merciful knowledge of our frailty and unfaithfulness, He has provided a covenanted way of response in the obedient life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, His righteous Servant, His beloved Son. In Jesus Christ God has not only done a work of grace for us and upon us in which He has done away with our guilt and sin and set us free, but He has also provided for us in the obedient humanity of Jesus Christ, a perfected communion between man and God in which the Covenant-union is fully and finally actualised between them. It is in that obedient Humanity, and in that perfect communion between the Son and the Father, lived and worked out to the uttermost within our human existence, that we are mercifully given to share. That is to say, in Jesus Christ the Covenant faithfulness of God has been met and answered by a Covenant faithfulness within our humanity, so that that divine-human faithfulness forms the very content and substance of the fulfilled Covenant which is the New Covenant. Thus the Covenant relationship is now filled with the relationship or communion between the Son and the Father, and it is in that communion that we are given to share by the Spirit, and we can be given to share in it for that Covenant Communion was wrought out and perfected in union with our humanity in Jesus Christ. With that change in the form and content of the Covenant, the sacramental seal becomes the seal of union with Christ and of communion with the Father through union with Christ. The form that this Covenant-Communion takes is the Church, the Body of Christ, and the sacrament of initiation into that communion and of participation in the relation of the Son to the Father, is holy Baptism. In the nature of the case, Baptism is the sacrament of what has already been fulfilled for us and on our behalf in Christ; more specifically it is the sacrament of the obedience of Christ offered in our stead, in which He throughout His life and in His death stood in our place and gave to God an account for us, submitting to the Father's judgment upon our sin and guilt, and it is the sacrament of the Father's satisfaction in the life and work of

His Beloved Son whom He sent to carry through this redemptive work on our behalf. More briefly, Baptism is the Sacrament of the fact that in Jesus Christ God has bound Himself to us and bound us to Himself, before ever we have bound ourselves to Him.

“Before ever we have bound ourselves to Him”—that has to be emphasised. Baptism is not the Sacrament of a Covenant voluntarily made between two partners, and which is only made when both partners freely and willingly enter into contract. In that event, Baptism would be partially the sacrament of God’s act, and partially the Sacrament of the individual’s act—and so it has been, and still is, frequently expounded. But in the Biblical teaching God’s Covenant is quite a different thing from a contract, for it is wholly and graciously made by God, and depends therefore entirely upon the divine faithfulness. But in the Biblical Covenant there are not only two factors, God and man, but a third, the Mediator of the Covenant, who is yet not a third, for He is God on the one hand, and Man on the other hand. But His divine-human faithfulness and divine-human fulfilment is proclaimed to man in the Gospel as the good news of salvation, namely, that God the Son become Man has offered to the Father a human response and a human obedience, and a human fulfilment of His Covenant-will, doing in our stead and in our place and on our behalf what we are unable to do, and doing it freely that we may freely share in it. Our part in the fulfilment has already been completed, and so Jesus Christ invites us in the Gospel to bring all our burdens to Him and to be yoked together with Him, for He has already made Himself responsible for us. When therefore Jesus had fulfilled all righteousness as He was baptised to do, He gave His Church the ordinance of Baptism to be administered as the sacrament of His fulfilled work, and as the sign and seal of His promise, extended to all men in the proclamation of the Gospel. Baptism is above all the Sacrament of that vicarious obedience of the Son to the Father which we are given to share through the Spirit; but as such it is a sharing in a finished work to which we cannot add one iota of our own, it is a participation in a righteousness not our own, and therefore we can only come to Baptism to receive and to rely upon the Mediator.



Just because in Baptism we are drawn into the covenanted communion and covenanted way of response, we are drawn into the sphere of obedience to the Father; just because we are given to share in the obedience of Jesus to the Father, we are covenanted to a life of obedience in His Name. Baptism requires faith and obedience, just because it is the sacrament of our sharing in Christ's obedience and faith, but the Sacrament of Baptism tells us in unmistakable terms that it is not upon our own faith or our own faithfulness that we rely, but upon Christ alone and upon His faithfulness. Baptism is primarily and fundamentally, then, the sacrament of Christ's obedience on our behalf, and of His faithfulness, and therefore it is the Sacrament which covenants us to a life of faith and obedience to the Father in Him. He who is baptised by that sign and seal relies not upon himself, but flees from his own weakness and faithlessness to the everlasting faithfulness of God, but he also continues to attest before men that he renounces reliance upon himself and his own works of obedience or faithfulness to God's Will. That is the faith and faithfulness in which and into which we are baptised, the faith and faithfulness in which and into which we baptise our children, for the promise is not only to us, but to them also in the faithfulness of Christ.

It is when we keep this Biblical perspective and refuse to let go as the very essence of the Gospel that God has bound Himself to us and bound us to Himself before ever we bind ourselves to Him, that we have no difficulty about infant-baptism, for infant-baptism is then seen to be the clearest form of the proclamation of the Gospel and of a Gospel which covenants us to a life of obedience to the Father. But whether baptism is administered to children or adults, it is administered with the same doctrine and with the same form, for it is only as little children that we enter into this inheritance of the Kingdom bestowed upon us in the New Covenant, and we enter into it relying not upon ourselves in any form, but solely upon Him who has already laid hold of us by His grace and who wills to have fellowship with us on that basis, that we may be free to love and trust Him all our days.

*Edinburgh.*

*Thomas F. Torrance.*