

**Tyndale Graduate School of Theology  
Bible College of New Zealand**

**Assignment Cover Sheet  
SR1  
Research Paper**

**Faith, Family and Fire Insurance:**

*A Reflection on Convergence in Attitudes and Practice  
of Christian Initiation in three church traditions.*

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## **FOREWORD**

The woman on the phone was beside herself with fury: “I’m ringing to ask why the Presbyterian church no longer baptises babies”, she said, “How dare you refuse to christen a little child who has done no one any harm?” She wouldn’t tell me her name, nor what Presbyterian church had refused to baptise one of her extended family, but it was clear from our discussion that she held to what I call the ‘Fire Insurance’ view of infant baptism. We had a vigorous half-hour conversation on the meaning of baptism, the appropriate context for the sacrament, and the range of alternatives our church offers those not able to make the baptismal vows with integrity. And I assured her that Howick Presbyterian Church certainly does baptise babies!

I have had an abiding interest in infant baptism, an interest that stemmed from a number of threads in my personal history. First, I was brought for baptism as a baby in the traditional Presbyterian manner - and for my parents this meant that I was a Christian, though they also encouraged me in my teenage years when I discovered the notion of personal commitment to Christ as Lord. Having made that faith commitment, I was positively influenced by Evangelical movements at school and university, where no particular doctrine of baptism as such was propounded but most members came from the Baptist/Brethren segments of Protestantism. Third, I married someone from the Open Brethren, who became a Presbyterian but still has profound doubts about our theology of baptism, as did I at that stage. Fourth, I found that my theological education did little to reassure me about the validity of baptising infants, and in fact my professors appeared remarkably close-minded about the issue. Fifthly, as I studied, read and discussed (often to the consternation of my fellow students, who found my preoccupation with this subject baffling), I came to a position where I respected the doctrine of infant baptism as a valid interpretation of Scripture and Tradition, and was comfortable with conducting the sacrament for the children of believers. Sixthly, though, we chose not ask for baptism for our children, preferring to make our vows of Christian nurture in a service of presentation and thanksgiving, so that they could be baptised subsequent to coming to faith. In the 30 years since my ordination I have striven to keep faith with our Presbyterian church's historic position on baptism, despite numerous frustrations with parents who have inadequate rationale for their request, others who have convinced us to baptise their children but have never been seen again, and young adults who have come longing for believers' baptism despite having received the sacrament in infancy. The freeing up of our church order on this matter, and the introduction of the concept of 'confirmation of baptism' by immersion, have been a great relief to me. The social changes of recent years have seen my attitudes to infant initiation become more relational and flexible, and this year the birth of my first grandchild has even seen me reviewing my objections to infant baptism!

For these reasons I decided to use my study leave to refresh my thinking about this issue, and to undertake a research project exploring the different practices of infant initiation in three faith traditions, identifying areas of convergence and noting connections with current thinking about the spirituality of children.

**Vivian Coleman, Howick, June - November 2005**

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The discipline of Practical Theology arose in the late twentieth century out of a growing awareness that, because the practice of Christian ministry is loaded with theory, there is benefit to be gained from considering the theological assumptions pervading specific aspects of church life.<sup>1</sup> Practical Theology examines the “messy arena of human action”, where our practices embody our deepest convictions about God.<sup>2</sup> It examines the language and procedures of faith communities, in order to clarify the norms that lie behind them, to assess these norms in the light of theology, and to provide recommendations for possible alternative words and practices.<sup>3</sup> The basic tasks can be summarised as practical questions:

1. What is happening? (the descriptive task)
2. Why? (the interpretive task)
3. How does this practice reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ? (the normative task)
4. What refinements of this practice would mirror God more clearly? (the pragmatic task)<sup>4</sup>

The diverse practices of infant initiation in the faith community offer rich territory for a practical theologian to engage in respectful critique and to make suggestions for new ecumenical sensitivity. The field can be examined for norms which have been historically pursued by a faith tradition and for modifications of practice that show promise in a changing social context.<sup>5</sup> Historically the attitudes and actions of churches towards young children were wrapped up, along with concepts of sin, faith and community, with the central Biblical theme of baptism.

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Bridger, "Old Questions, New Agenda: Reflections on the Scripture Union Theology of Childhood Resource Paper," *Journal of Christian Education* 47, no. 1 (2004). P 25 - 26

<sup>2</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, "Getting out of God's Way: Freeing Our Inner Theologian," *Youthworker* Jan/Feb (2005).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Osmer, "Restructuring Confirmation," *Theology Today* 49, no. April 1992 (1992). P 47ff

<sup>4</sup> Richard Osmer, and Schweitzer, Freidrich, *Developing a Public Faith* (St Louis: Chalice, 2003). Pp 2 - 4

<sup>5</sup> The term "practice is confined in practical theology to “socially-shared activity of such richness and depth that it shapes the character of its participants”. Osmer, "Restructuring Confirmation." P 49

The rite of baptism has always been the norm for an adult convert's initiation into the journey of discipleship and membership of the church, but 89% of churches in the world today extend the rite to the children of believers, or in some cases, of any parents who ask the faith community for the sacrament.<sup>6</sup> These churches are usually called Paedobaptists, though the fact that they baptise adults as well as extending the rite to children, leads some to use the appellation 'All-Age Baptism' churches. By contrast the Believer's Baptism (Credobaptist) tradition reserves the rite to those who can make their own profession of faith. In previous generations it was common for those in both traditions (i.e. credobaptist and paedobaptist) to be ignorant of the theological concerns of the other, and to judge one another only by abuses.<sup>7</sup> However, in the last twenty years a number of significant consultations have been held for the purpose of facilitating understanding between the various perspectives, and one of these occasions was associated with the production of a convergence document that has gained wide acceptance.<sup>8</sup>

Testing one's own heritage, by submitting it to the scrutiny of fellow Christians who take a different approach, is a courageous and demanding task. The bewildering complexity of disparate practices are all sincerely held to be grounded in scripture, so it is not just a matter of piling up proof-texts from the Bible, but rather of attempting to recognise the validity of one another's tradition without compromising one's own deep convictions. The search for a synthesis that acknowledges the rich meaning of initiation in all its forms has been drawn out, but promises to enrich understanding and indicate possible refinements of practice.

The World Council of Churches, a community of Christian churches representing a rich diversity of cultural backgrounds and traditions, has devoted a good deal of attention to overcoming doctrinal division on baptism.<sup>9</sup> It is not an authority intent on controlling what

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6 John Roxborough, "Baptism and the Churches," chapter in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: A Malaysian Contribution*, ed. S G Yeoh (Petaling Jaya: Malaysian Council of Churches, 1992). p 13

7 Ibid. p13

8 The document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* was produced by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, on Baptism Eucharist and Ministry, in Lima, Peru, 1982 Other events included Consultation on Baptism, Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches, at Louisville, USA, 1980 and Infant Baptism? the arguments for and against, at the University of South Africa in Johannesburg in 1984

<sup>9</sup> WCC's Faith and Order Commission in preface to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 1982.

Christians believe and do, but rather a fellowship committed to striving together towards a more visible unity. The methodology it has adopted over the last thirty years has been called a Copernican revolution.<sup>10</sup> Instead of seeing one's own tradition as the centre of the ecclesiastical universe, circled by other streams with various degrees of closeness, there is now a genuine attempt to see Jesus Christ as the centre, with each tradition revolving around the revelation of God in the Christian Scriptures. Or to use a different analogy - to look at the common trunk instead of the branches and twigs.<sup>11</sup> Past attempts at consensus had involved the exercise of verbal gymnastics, but the 1982 gathering of the WCC Faith and Order Commission at Lima brought the traditions together in a new spirit of dialogue that has gained broad acceptance in the churches.<sup>12</sup>

Around the same time as Lima, consultations held at Louisville and Johannesburg were focussed much more on the specifics of infant versus believer's baptism.<sup>13</sup> Contributors acknowledged that every tradition looks at the Biblical and historical material through "its own spectacles", both sides of the baptism debate argue their perspective from Scripture.<sup>14</sup> So the starting point for a discussion of infant rites, and especially baptism, is the Biblical and historical background - though that may not be where the debate ends.

The word baptism is not found in the Old Testament - but central to Hebrew theology is the concept of God as covenant-maker, the one who throughout history has reached out to people in love. The covenant community that began with Abraham was founded on a gracious divine promise and a response of human obedience, and was an important theological backdrop to the early church, born out of Judaism. Baptism is first mentioned in the New Testament when John the Baptist came out of the first-century Palestinian desert with a call to repentance, which he symbolised by river baptism.<sup>15</sup> Immersion

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<sup>10</sup> M Kinnamon, *Why It Matters*, Risk Book No 25, (Geneva: WCC, 1985). p10

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p10

<sup>12</sup> Admittedly that acceptance has frequently been couched in caveat; the responses solicited by the WCC show that some streams regard it as 'too weak' on infant baptism, while others says its acceptance of infant baptism is too definite. See Max Thurian, *Churches Respond to B.E.M.: Vols 1, 2, 4 and 6*, Faith and Order Papers 129, 132, 137, 144 (Geneva: WCC, 1986 - 88).

<sup>13</sup> Louisville 1979, Johannesburg 1983

<sup>14</sup> Though not so much in literal imperative as from a holistic hermeneutic, see G R Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (London: Macmillan, 1966).p90

<sup>15</sup> Mark 1; 4,5

baptism was not new to the people of the day; antecedents in the Hebrew and Hellenistic worlds meant it would have been familiar to both Jewish and Gentile converts as an “eloquent form of self-cleansing” and a sign of changed allegiance.<sup>16</sup> John the Baptist reframed this ritual bath into a more public and objective expression of repentance, an acted parable that signified the ethical renewal of the coming Messianic Age.<sup>17</sup> Jesus came to John for baptism, not because he needed moral renewal but to align with sinful humanity and ‘to fulfil all righteousness’.<sup>18</sup> Four elements of Jesus’ baptism have been said to illuminate the meaning of the ritual for a Christian: Assurance of Sonship, Call to Servanthood, Commissioning for Ministry, and Anointing with Holy Spirit.<sup>19</sup> Some churches would also see immense significance in the fact that Jesus volunteered himself for baptism, and many would understand the whole gamut of Jesus’ ministry to be gathered up in the rite.<sup>20</sup>

The practice of baptism in the name of Jesus was used in the church from the start, as the rite of acceptance into the new movement.<sup>21</sup> The Scriptures know no unbaptised Christians and Paul assumed a common baptism across all the churches.<sup>22</sup> Few features of Christianity can be traced back to the beginning with such confidence and so baptism has a special place as a dominical ordinance, or sacrament.<sup>23</sup> The New Testament links baptism inextricably with faith and associates conversion to Jesus Christ with a number of motifs including repentance, faith, water baptism, Spirit baptism, and incorporation into the church.<sup>24</sup> Despite centuries of baptism of infants, however, the Biblical evidence in support

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<sup>16</sup> When a pagan became a Jew, as well as being circumcised, they were baptised, usually by self-immersion in a mikveh in the presence of official witnesses, R E O White, *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960).p 268f

<sup>17</sup> Generosity, justice, honesty, contentment, See Luke 3: 10 - 14 and Matthew 3: 8 – 11. John Baptist was envisaging the time prophesied in the Hebrew Bible when the Spirit would be given to all believers. See also Calum Gilmour, "Baptism in the New Testament," *Journeyings Supplement 2: Baptism, Past, Present and Future* (1992).P 87

<sup>18</sup> Because Jesus had no sin it wasn't necessary for him to be baptised (he was already “clean”) but it was fitting for him to do so. 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4: 15; I John 3; 5. Matthew 3: 14 – 15. It signified in advance what he came to do - to act proxy for human beings - on the Cross. Note that Luke 12: 49ff looks ahead to his death and calls it his baptism.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Green, *Baptism; Its Purpose, Practice and Power*. (London: Hodder and Stoughton,, 1987). Pp 40 - 42

<sup>20</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 1982, B1

<sup>21</sup> M Root, and Saarinen, R, *Baptism and the Unity of the Church* (Michigan: Eerdmans/WCC, 1998)., p90

<sup>22</sup> Acts 2: 38 – 41. The Ephesian 'disciples' of Acts 19 were baptised (with John's baptism) but were clearly not Christians; they had no experience of the risen Jesus (the Spirit). That is why Paul had no compunction about baptising them into the name of Jesus vv 5,6.

<sup>23</sup> Matthew 28: 19. 20, see *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 1982, B1. The word sacrament is extra-biblical and capable of widely divergent meaning. “What belongs to the set 'sacrament' depends on your definition.” Roxborough. p16

<sup>24</sup> Pawson sees all of these as essential components but notes they may not always take place in the same order; see David Pawson, *The Normal Christian Birth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1989). for a helpful explanation

of this practice is now agreed to be circumstantial, and the case for propriety a cumulative one.<sup>25</sup> Both viewpoints on the baptism of children (paedobaptism and credobaptism) can be argued by extrapolation from Scripture, as interpreted by a particular interpretive tradition.

By asking the down-to-earth questions “What is happening and why?” and “How can what is happening reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ more clearly?” Practical Theology can point up and perhaps challenge these differences, and also note areas of convergence which may otherwise be overlooked. Theological reflection on what is said and done can show how each tradition wears lenses which influence their own Biblical hermeneutic.<sup>26</sup> Practical Theology, in examining infant rites in recent decades, has also begun to explore the “spirituality” of the child, integrating the findings of psychology, sociology and neuroscience into a theological anthropology that may explain the endorsement, or repudiation, of the various practices of infant baptism.

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<sup>25</sup> Colin Buchanan, *A Case for Infant Baptism*, vol. Booklet 20 (London: Grove, 1973). p6

<sup>26</sup> Beasley-Murray. 1966, for example notes lenses manufactured by trusted Baptist opticians”, p 96



## CHAPTER 2: INFANT RITES AND SPIRITUALITY

The area of the spirituality of the child, and Christian ministry to and with young people, was, for many centuries, of marginal interest to theologians.<sup>27</sup> Augustine and Aquinas focused on the infant as a member of fallen humanity, needing to be restored by baptism, while Calvin and Luther were more interested in the role of the Christian home in nurturing infant faith.<sup>28</sup> Following the Reformation the thinking of the church in relation to children still tended to concentrate on their education; nineteenth century Protestant Sunday Schools and Catholic parochial schools were both founded on a view of the child as an empty vessel needing to be filled with information about faith, through intentional methodologies such as rote learning and catechisms. Change came about when the Religious Education Movement of the early twentieth century eschewed catechetical instruction in favour of engaging persons in a process of discovering beliefs which are personally meaningful in light of their experience.<sup>29</sup> Another trend in Western countries at least was the gradual process of secularisation over the twentieth century which meant that the Christendom paradigm, where all children are assumed to have been born into a Christian home, no longer applied.

In the mid-twentieth century a further paradigm shift took place, with the work of Ronald Goldman, a psychologist who applied the stage-developmental theory of Jean Piaget to the context of religious instruction in British schools. His theoretical foundation for the incremental nature of religious growth dominated the practice of Christian Education for thirty years.<sup>30</sup> Goldman considered it was unwise to teach the complex religious concepts of the Bible to young people, because of their limited cognitive abilities; he advocated more child-centred themes for awakening spiritual awareness, starting from their own life experiences.<sup>31</sup> Goldman's work has had worldwide influence, but was challenged by American John Westerhoff III who promoted a more relational focus. He had observed the importance of ritual in ethnic churches, and noted that a fundamental form of learning is a child's own

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<sup>27</sup> Marcia Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). P 3 Here I am using 'spirituality' to signify 'sensitivity to matters of ultimate meaning, openness to the divine', (Nature) ; 'an inner sense of something greater than oneself, recognition of a meaning to existence that transcends one's immediate circumstances' (Pelletier)

<sup>28</sup> Catherine A. Brekus, *Children in Christian Thought*(Beliefnet.com, 2002, accessed 2005); available from [http://www.beliefnet.com/story/18/story\\_1873.html](http://www.beliefnet.com/story/18/story_1873.html).

<sup>29</sup> Osmer, "Restructuring Confirmation." P 61

<sup>30</sup> Ronald Goldman, *Readiness for Religion; a Basis for Developmental Religious Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965).

<sup>31</sup> Eg Nature, holidays, pets etc, and arousing the child's curiosity. Ibid. page 8, p 197

experience of community life.<sup>32</sup> He advised churches to create a Christian Education environment more like a home than a school, where children could experience religious faith, and see it modelled in the lives of significant people.<sup>33</sup> Ministry with child was widening to include worship, pastoral care, and social activities, as well as educational endeavours.

Westerhoff's approach had drawn on research into the 'Stages of Faith' by James Fowler, who first formulated his classic study of that name in 1981, and has continued to develop the theory.<sup>34</sup> Fowler sees an individual's spiritual experience – their faith journey - moving through six stages.<sup>35</sup> Faith, in the broadest sense, is one's way of understanding God and God's action in human life, an understanding that can be expected to change in response to life experiences.<sup>36</sup> Few people however progress through all six faith stages, and many attain only two or three, remaining in one place for the rest of their life.<sup>37</sup> The first stages Fowler described relate to his observations of the 'faith' development of children.<sup>38</sup> He explains the spirituality of very young children as an undifferentiated stage when the presence or absence of trust, courage, hope, and love, in their relational environments, lay a foundation for future feelings of trust and mutuality.<sup>39</sup> The child's next "Intuitive Projective" faith stage (about three to seven years) is highly imaginative, and the source of a healthy imitative faith so long as the world is experienced as a friendly, welcoming place and God as a loving, dependable parent.<sup>40</sup> As children begin to "reason" around age seven, imagination gives way to a desire to know how things really are and how they fit together. In this "Mythic-Literal" phase children love stories but do not distinguish between those that are historically true and those that have symbolic meaning.<sup>41</sup> The central feature of literal faith is a view of God as the rewarder of good and punisher of evil, but eventually reality will challenge this too-literal view of God. Most young people will embrace a new relational stage of faith based on hero worship and peer support.<sup>42</sup> John Westerhoff freely adapted Fowler's schema and

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<sup>32</sup> John H III Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (East Malvern: Dove Communications, 1976). Page 63

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Page 81, 84

<sup>34</sup> James Fowler, *The Stages of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981). James Fowler, "Keeping Faith with God and Our Children," *Religious Education* 89, no. 4 (1994). and James Fowler, "Faith Development at 30: Naming the Challenges of Faith in a New Millennium," *Religious Education* 99, no. 4 (2004).

<sup>35</sup> Intuitive –projective, mythic literal, synthetic-conventional, individuative reflective, conjunctive and universalising faith. Fowler, *The Stages of Faith*.

<sup>36</sup> Richard Sweeney, *How God Invites Us to Grow: Six Stages of Faith Development*(Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 1987, accessed 13 June 2005); available from [americancatholic.org/newsletters/CU/ac1087](http://americancatholic.org/newsletters/CU/ac1087).

<sup>37</sup> Fowler may see this as inadequate but stops short of stating the sixth stage is the ideal.

<sup>38</sup> Faith here does not pertain only to Christian faith but to any source of a sense of ultimate meaning

<sup>39</sup> Fowler drew on an unpublished work of Niebuhr (1960) for this idea. See Fowler, *The Stages of Faith*. P 5, 121

<sup>40</sup> See Fowler p 122 ff also Sweeney, (accessed).2005 ibid

<sup>41</sup> Fowler, *The Stages of Faith*. P 149ff

<sup>42</sup> Sweeney, (accessed) 2005.

characterised four distinctive aspects of the faith pilgrimage as Styles rather than Stages: experienced faith, affiliative faith, searching faith and owned faith.<sup>43</sup> Westerhoff's work – and Fowler's - have made a significant contribution to the understanding of the inherent spirituality and emerging faith of children.<sup>44</sup>

Scripture Union, an evangelical Christian movement, has also attended to the theoretical foundation for the wider field of ministry with children. Goldman's conventional wisdom that cognitive psychology renders most spiritual conversation with children a wasteful exercise, did not accord with the experience of Francis Bridger as a children's worker with Scripture Union. Using Fowler's and Westerhoff's insights, and espousing a conviction that the Bible is good news even for children, he wrote in 1988 of helping children "find faith". "Salvation", maintains Bridger, "is a process where God takes the faith given as part of creation" and by grace transforms it into saving faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>45</sup> Children are natural followers, for whom faith is a tripod comprising believing, trusting, and doing, each of which can be addressed by taking proper account of the insights of developmental psychology.<sup>46</sup> A later Scripture Union document suggests parents and children's workers can listen carefully, act as prompts in the conversation between God and child, and collaborate with the Spirit's prevenient work.<sup>47</sup>

In the early nineties, research findings about the spiritual life of children took a quantum leap with the work of Robert Coles, a phenomenological psychotherapist who literally listened to children's voices, which he described as occupying the space between science and imagination.<sup>48</sup> He noted that children sift and sort spiritual matters in their own manner and time, and not necessarily in a linear manner or in accord with their cognitive stage.<sup>49</sup> They can obtain their values, their ethics, and their answers to the big questions of life less through adults' didactic efforts than their non-cognitive experience of the songs, poems and

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<sup>43</sup> Westerhoff. Pages 89 - 99

<sup>44</sup> As children mature physically, they do not necessarily progress to later stages of faith. Many adults may remain at stage 2 or 3 and may even progress backwards. Nathan Parry, "Faith Development, Postmodernity and Church" (School of Ministry, 2005). P 7

<sup>45</sup> Francis Bridger, *Children Finding Faith* (London: Scripture Union, 1988).p 15

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. page 18

<sup>47</sup> Cecily Cupitt, *Come and Follow* (Homebush West, NSW: Scripture Union, 1992). page 10 -12

<sup>48</sup> Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (London: Harper Collins, 1991). Page 5, 20

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. page 23

prayers of worship,<sup>50</sup> Autobiographical material also testifies to the strength of childhood experiences of ritual in fixing memories and values.<sup>51</sup>

Nottingham University scholar David Hay came to the matter of juvenile spirituality with the same respect for the voices of children that Coles had adopted. He wanted to explore the generic nature of spirituality, and to attend to aspects of the spirit of the child, that are often submerged, he felt, by researchers who focus on 'God talk.'<sup>52</sup> Hay began with a review of existing data of research with children, and integrated a number of leading contributors: Alister Hardy's thesis on the biology of spirituality, Rudolph Otto's work on experiencing the mystery of the sacred, and Karl Rahner's theme of the transcendental inherent in human life.<sup>53</sup> He concluded that "spiritual awareness is a natural human predisposition, often overlaid by cultural constructions, but nevertheless a biological reality."<sup>54</sup> This view has been borne out this century by the medical research of Andrew Newberg, a neuro-scientist who presents evidence that spirituality is hardwired into the human brain.<sup>55</sup> Hay and his researcher Rebecca Nye embarked on an ambitious series of conversations with children, using active listening to "map the geography" of the inherent spirituality of children.<sup>56</sup> They identified three categories of spiritual sensitivity (awareness, mystery, and value) and coined the term "relational consciousness" to describe patterns of I-Self, I-Others, I-World, and I-God.<sup>57</sup> They argued that this fundamental human trait, akin to the 'knowing about knowing' of metacognition, is most clearly seen in children's spirituality.<sup>58</sup> Christian language, however, can suppress this natural spiritual awareness as a child grows up and becomes alienated from their relational consciousness. They offered imaginative suggestions (eg hyper-awareness of the senses used in eating an apple) for teachers who wish to nurture the spirit of the child in ways that go beyond the rational constraints of a Religious Education curriculum.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Questions like "Where did I come from", "Who am I?", "Where am I going?" Ibid. page 36

<sup>51</sup> See eg 'Catholic Girls'

<sup>52</sup> David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Fount, 1998). P 8, 54

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Pages 40 - 56

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. Page vii

<sup>55</sup> Andrew Newberg, Eugene D'Aquil, and Vince Rause, *Why God Wont Go Away* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2001).

<sup>56</sup> Hay and Nye. Page 58

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.p 114

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. page 113ff Metacognition is higher order thinking.

<sup>59</sup> In the twenty-first century David Hay's conviction, that spiritual awareness is an objective reality, has been contested by Clive Erricker, whose open-ended Children and Worldviews research project aims to respect the unique identity of each individual child. See Pages 43 – 45 of Andrew Wright, ed., *Spirituality and Education*, Master Classes in Education (London: Routledge Falmer, 2000).

This century, Australian authors have produced some valuable theological thinking on developing the nascent spirituality of children. Ron Buckland, a specialist in family ministries, notes that insights into the cognitive capacities of young people can never adequately describe the reality of an individual child.<sup>60</sup> He refers to a study where Piaget's findings, about concrete and abstract thinking, were overturned by rewording the questions, suggesting more about the inability of adults to enter the world of a child, than about psychological limitations.<sup>61</sup> Buckland is a firm advocate of spiritual dialogue with children, of listening attentively to their questions and their answers, and of teaching the child and not the curriculum. His chapter on Children and the Kingdom of God gives an overview of seven different perspectives of infant spirituality and soteriology:<sup>62</sup>

1. Children are in the same position as adults, ie outside the Kingdom, and need to be converted.
2. The presence of a Christian parent establishes right standing before God, under God's covenant.
3. The presence of a Christian parent creates an environment of spiritual privilege, but not right standing.
4. The rite of baptism establishes right standing before God, though the adult faith of a sponsor is needed.
5. The experience of baptism strengthens privilege and enhance the likelihood of future faith.
6. All children belong to God because of the atoning work of Christ.
7. A child has a "belongingness" to God that may later become rebellion.

Buckland's own view, which he believes resolves the contradictions among the other six, is the seventh answer, that all children begin with God, but will drift from that position unless an effective evangelistic or nurturing influence operates in their lives.<sup>63</sup>

In 2003 an International Commission of Scripture Union widened discussion of this line of reasoning by publishing a ground-breaking study called *The Theology of Childhood*, and

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<sup>60</sup> Ron Buckland, *Perspectives on Children and the Gospel* (West Gosford NSW: Scripture Union, 2001).Pages 19 – 26, 115

<sup>61</sup> Donaldson, 1978 cited in Ibid. page 23

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p 53 – 64

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p 63 Wesley taught a similar concept, see Catherine Stonehouse, "The Scripture Union Theology of Childhood Resource Paper: A Wesleyan Response," *Journal Of Christian Education* 47, no. 1 (2004). P 41

inviting responses to it from a number of church contexts.<sup>64</sup> The paper frankly acknowledges that there are many conundrums for believers when it comes to their own children and those of others, especially when a child dies in infancy. The Bible is written about adults, but what of the children? Does God view them differently? What of Original Sin? Repentance? Salvation? The Covenant? Kingdom Belongingness? Reason? Are some children 'nurtured into faith' without any observable transition? The paper faces up to the issues with integrity, but reminds readers of the many other conundrums or paradoxes to be found in the Bible.<sup>65</sup> The authors call for a detailed combing of Scripture and a careful partnering of relevant insights, such as 'Imago Dei' with 'Original Sin', in the confidence that clearer guidelines will emerge.<sup>66</sup> Although the study dismisses work like Nye's on the spirituality of children as vague and confusing, it does acknowledge the reality of childhood experiences of common grace and revelation.<sup>67</sup> A subsequent issue of the *Journal of Christian Education* contained responses from a range of commentators experienced in ministry with children in various educational and denominational contexts. Each was in its own way affirming of the direction of the paper, and especially of the conclusions about paradox – "a wrestling with the complexities of human reality and divine grace."<sup>68</sup>

Today's scientific and biblical anthropology points to a deep, and probably inherent, receptiveness to spiritual matters in children and young people, with evidence that significant levels of childhood spiritual experience have always existed.<sup>69</sup> Marva Dawn's inquiry into children in church draws on CS Lewis' concept of *sehnsucht*, a profound unquenchable spiritual yearning, to explain this receptiveness.<sup>70</sup> Her dynamic ecclesiology sees youngsters becoming part of the faith that already exists in the people of God; in today's church, everyone must take responsibility for parenting children and youth, for affirming them, and giving them meaningful roles. The critical role of community is a recurring theme in studies of childhood

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<sup>64</sup> W Anderson, Cohen, D, Morpew, P, Scott, L, and Strachan, W, "Theology of Childhood: A Theological Resource Framed to Guide the Practice of Evangelising and Nurturing Children," *Journal of Christian Education* 46, no. 3 (2003). and the responses from Catholic Wesleyan Anglican and Baptist commentators in the May 2004 edition of the same periodical.

<sup>65</sup> Eg the sovereignty of God as against human free will.

<sup>66</sup> Anderson. P 7. See also P 27 of Bridger, "Old Questions, New Agenda: Reflections on the Scripture Union Theology of Childhood Resource Paper." He notes that it is a sign of the maturing of Evangelicalism for a SU paper to speak of paradox, which 25 years ago would have immediately led to charges of biblical and theological liberalism.

<sup>67</sup> Margaret and Trevor Cooling, "The Scripture Union Theology of Childhood Resource Paper: A Response," *Journal of Christian Education* 47, no. 1 (2004).

<sup>68</sup> Stonehouse. P 37

<sup>69</sup> Hay's estimated figure of 50 % in 1986 is now thought to be more accurately 70 %. This faith response seems to be an experience of transcendent reality, with a non-rational component not dependent on cognitive structures, which mature along a clearly delineated developmental pathway. See Newberg, D'Aquil, and Rause. PP 7, 151, 171

<sup>70</sup> Marva Dawn, *Is It a Lost Cause?* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1997). Page 5, 18

spirituality; a recent study of resilience in children also argues for youngsters' innate need for connection with others as they develop a sense of moral and spiritual purpose. The report, *Hardwired to Connect*, sets out to prove from neuroscience that the quality of community in which a child is nurtured, profoundly affects how brain circuits develop.<sup>71</sup> A review of the research noted that "*Children's needs are best met through nurturing communities .....that articulate a clear and inspiring vision of a good and meaningful life, and then lovingly help children bring that vision to pass in their own lives.*"<sup>72</sup>

Christian nurture today then must take account of the developmental stages of children, but recognize too that spirituality is not just about intellectual learning or individual experience. It is concerned to develop children's spiritual awareness, but directed towards knowing the God revealed in Jesus Christ, not just an ambiguous "Other." This Jesus is the One who took children and blessed them, and promoted childhood as a model or even a pathway into the Kingdom.<sup>73</sup> A soundly Biblical view of children will integrate the inherent paradoxes of childhood: "being fully human and made in the image of God, yet still developing and in need of guidance; gifts of God and sources of joy, yet also capable of selfish and sinful actions; metaphors for immature faith and childish behavior and yet models of faith and sources of revelation."<sup>74</sup> A key paradox for this review is the tension between a young child's experience of God's presence in their common humanity, and the common apprehension of many faith traditions that children (and adults) "receive the Holy Spirit at baptism."<sup>75</sup> A wider view of Christian initiation will, however, take account of other historic perspectives of the role of baptism in faith development.

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<sup>71</sup> The Commission on Children at Risk, *Hardwired to Connect: The New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities* (New York: Institute for American Values, 2003).

<sup>72</sup> The Mothers Council Task Force, *Gather around the Children*(accessed 1 May 2004); available from [www.watchoutforchildren.org/Gather\\_Around\\_the\\_Children.pdf](http://www.watchoutforchildren.org/Gather_Around_the_Children.pdf).

<sup>73</sup> Mark 10: 13- 16, Matthew 18: 2 – 5 and parallels. These passages are often used in liturgies relating to children, though there is no evidence that the carries dominical authority as such.

<sup>74</sup> Stonehouse. P 36 quoting Bunge 2004, p 51

<sup>75</sup> See for example Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship, "Introduction to the Rite of Infant Baptism," in *Vatican Council II: More Postconciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Newport: Costello Publishing Company, 1973). P 30 and Dawn. P 111

This study will focus on three major perspectives concerning children in the church as expressed in practices and theology of infant initiation, each perspective of which falls on a continuum of emphasis between Divine Grace and Human Response:<sup>76</sup>

1. The Roman Catholic church has traditionally taken the “instrumental” view, the conviction that baptism is more than a symbol, it is an effectual vehicle of God’s saving grace. Those who are validly baptised are truly born again; they are cleansed of their sins, renewed by the Holy Spirit and united to Christ and his church. The Catholic interpretation of Acts 2: 38 centres the attention on the realism of baptism: “be baptised for the forgiveness of sins and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Baptism here and elsewhere is spoken of as actually conveying something.<sup>77</sup> Traditionally this has been called *ex opere operato* - the Catholic belief that the sacrament is a unique conductor of God's grace into human lives, and children therefore need to be baptised.<sup>78</sup> This view falls solidly at the Divine end of the Grace-Response Continuum.

2. The Reformed tradition grew out of protest against the extreme sacerdotalism of the Middle Ages, and softened the instrumental understanding of baptism. For Presbyterians the notion of participation in Christ’s community of faith is of prime importance, and the biblical concept of covenant explains infant baptism in terms of the solidarity of the Christian family. In the Reformed tradition, the words Acts 2: 38 “the promise is to you and to your children” explain the corporate nature of baptism, as a sign and seal of one’s belonging to Christ.<sup>79</sup> This view falls squarely in the middle of the Grace-Response Continuum.

3. The “Baptist” perspective is a much more individual approach, where baptism is seen to be a non-sacramental symbolic action testifying to personal faith in Christ. Thus only those individuals who have come to Christ in repentance, faith in the gospel and commitment to discipleship can offer themselves for baptism. For “Baptists” the aspect of Acts 2: 38 that is most compelling is the call to a transformed life; “Repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins”. “Baptists” do not baptise infants but usually offer parents of new-born

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<sup>76</sup> The differing positions in infant and adults baptism reflect varying views on the relative importance of divine grace and human response. Charles Scobie, *The Ways of Our God* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 2003). P 611. See Figure One at end of chapter

<sup>77</sup> Acts 22:16, Romans 6:3-5, Colossians 2:12

<sup>78</sup> Here I am using Catholic to mean the denomination based in Rome and led by the Pope, though my observations will largely apply to Greek Catholics as well

<sup>79</sup> Here I am using Reformed to encompass the denominations that align with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, a tradition dating back to the Reformation



children a rite of “infant dedication“ which implies initiation into the church family.<sup>80</sup> This view falls solidly at the Human end of the Grace-Response Continuum.

The chart below exaggerates the differences for sake of comparison:

<p><b><u>Sacrament</u></b>  <i>Orthodox, Catholic,          high Anglican</i>  <b>The gift of God</b>          Salvation          Regeneration          Personal faith not important          for baptism</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GRACE ALONE</p>	<p><b><u>Sign and Seal</u></b>  <i>Methodist,          Presbyterian,          low Anglican</i>  <b>Means of Grace</b>          Incorporation into Community          Personal faith is necessary          somewhere</p> <p style="text-align: center;">GRACE/RESPONSE</p>	<p><b><u>Ordinance</u></b>  <i>Baptist,          Open Brethren, Pentecostal</i>  <b>Purely symbolic</b>          The response of faith          A step of obedience          Voluntary</p> <p style="text-align: center;">RESPONSE ALONE<sup>81</sup></p>
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All three viewpoints on the Grace-Response continuum, explicated in Figure 1 overleaf, take the Bible seriously, and testify to the prevenient grace of God in human life, to the meaning of faith, and the importance of Christian nurture in the church. But the interplay of these is subtly nuanced, and both the differences and instances of agreement will be explicated by an examination of the three traditions, and especially of fresh thinking in each over the last thirty years.

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<sup>80</sup> Here I am using ‘Baptist’ to encompass the credobaptist churches in general, rather than the Baptist denomination as such; when quote marks are not used, the Baptist denomination is signified.

<b>GRACE EMPHASIS</b>	<b>RESPONSE EMPHASIS</b>
<p><b>A gift of God</b> A means of grace Sacrament God's action in history Proclamation of Christ's unique work Incorporation into Christ New humanity Adoption Rebirth - from above Joining a club Putting your name down About the church Makes you a Christian Absolutely essential Vows not important Christendom Person is committed to the Lord by the church</p> <p>A beginning <i>Ex opere operato</i> - works of itself High churches Established when worldview was supernatural Applied to children and adults Faith of the parents and/or the church Cleanses from original sin Repentance and faith can be anticipated</p> <p>I am baptised Sprinkling or pouring often used - initiation symbolism Channel of invisible grace God takes the initiative Regeneration precedes conversion Life insurance Vaccination Church is seen as mixture of believers and proto believers Membership &gt; conversion</p> <p><b>Verses most often referred to for Sacramental - a gift of God</b> Acts 2: 38,39 (emphasis on instrumentality/promise) Matthew 28: 18 - 20 (emphasis on baptism preceding teaching) Ephesians 2: 8 - 10 (emphasis on gift of God) Ezekiel 36.24-8 Isaiah 43: 1 - 5 John 3: 6 1 Peter 2: 9 - 10 Mark 10: 14 - 16 1 Corinthians 7:14</p>	<p><b>A Step of obedience</b> Outward sign of an inward change Ordinance Our activity now Acknowledging effect of Christ's work Cleansing Commitment Intimacy with Christ Putting on Christ Making a stand Resisting the devil About the individual Shows you are a Christian Sometimes an optional extra Vows very important Gathered church Person commits himself or herself to God through the church A base camp Not <i>ex opere operato</i> Low churches Influential with Age of Reason Applied to believers only Individual faith - believe and receive Testifies to cleansing from sin Repentance/faith must have been experienced I have been baptised Immersion symbolism preferred</p> <p>Visible sign of invisible grace received We make the response Conversion brings about regeneration\ Fulfilling righteousness Identifying with Christ/ dying to sin Church is a gathering of true believers Conversion &gt; membership</p> <p><b>Verses most often referred to for Symbolic - a step of obedience</b> Acts 2: 37, 38 (emphasis on repentance) Matthew 28: 18 - 20 (emphasis on making disciples preceding baptism) Ephesians 2: 8 - 10 (emphasis on medium of faith) Acts 8: 36 John 1: 12 Mark 16:16 Romans 6: 3 - 5 1 Peter 3:21 Galatians 3: 26</p>

### CHAPTER 3: INFANT RITES AND “CATHOLICS”

The generic name Catholic applies to the stream of Christianity which emphasises the objective or instrumental nature of the infant rite of baptism. When practical theologians ask the question “What’s happening?” in regard to infants, they find that for centuries the Catholic tradition has focused on the act of baptism itself - affusion with water, invocation of divine blessing and implicit commitment by the faith community to nurture the spirit of the child. This tradition takes the view that the sacrament actually effects the participation of the baptised person in the work of Christ. God is present and active in the operation of the church as it celebrates the rite. Churches that belong at this end of the spectrum are the Roman and Greek Catholic, Anglo-Catholic and Eastern Orthodox.<sup>82</sup> The “Catholic” concept is often characterised as *ex opere operato* - the belief that the orderly use of the sacrament has in itself the power of injecting God's grace into human lives, irrespective of the qualities or merits of the persons administering or receiving it.<sup>83</sup>

A historical review notes that from the second century onwards baptism, which had begun to be applied to infants, took on a mystical dimension, and became overlaid with ever-expanding ritual.<sup>84</sup> Early in the fourth century, under the Emperor Constantine, Christianity was legitimised, later to be adopted as the state religion by Theodosius. The effect of this was that no one, adult or child, was left unbaptised. The establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Empire and the closing of pagan temples resulted in rapid church growth.<sup>85</sup> Church affiliation needed to become quicker and easier. The bishop could not baptise every new member, so local priests were granted the right to baptize, and anointing and laying on of hands were reserved for the bishop's visit.<sup>86</sup> The time between baptism and the bishop's anointing gradually lengthened, and confirmation became established as an independent

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<sup>82</sup> Although beyond the scope of this study, it is noteworthy that Orthodox churches perform baptisms in a very instrumental manner, using material things, which are regarded as spirit-bearing. Through the rites of initiation, Orthodox believe, the child is saved and incorporated into the redeemed community, supplied with the Spirit, and entrusted with the ministry of establishing the kingdom. The invocation says “*Sanctify this water and make it the fountain of incorruption, the gift of sanctification, the remission of sins and the remedy of infirmities.*” Nikolas Zernov, *Orthodox Encounter* (London: Latimer House, 1961). p 35, 79

<sup>83</sup> Though the candidate must be rightly disposed for the grace of the sacrament to be really effectual

<sup>84</sup> F P Moller, “Objections to Infant Baptism,” in *Infant Baptism: The Arguments for and Against*, ed. A Konig, Lederle, H, and Moller, F (Roodepoort: CUM Books, 1984). pp 72f Moller notes that even Ignatius Loyola used the term magical.

<sup>85</sup> Osmer, “Restructuring Confirmation.” P 51

<sup>86</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Holy See, 1997, accessed 2005) available from [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a2.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a2.htm). Articles 1290 and 1303. The Eastern rite did not undergo this temporal separation.

liturgical rite<sup>87</sup> The catechumenate was shortened from years to weeks, and the instruction period for parents requesting infant baptism declined and eventually disappeared. There followed a dark age of extreme instrumentalism, when baptisms were compulsory, and forced baptising of offspring of Jewish or pagan parents could occur; baptism was seen by the church to be a benefit of which one may not deprive such children.<sup>88</sup> Baptism was a visible sign of an invisible reality taking place, and candidates were told “through the words and the hands of the priest, the Holy Spirit descends on you, and a different man comes forth, who has wiped away all the filth of his sins.”<sup>89</sup> There were debates about the validity of baptism were it administered by a heretic, and a belief in the spiritual solidarity of parents and children led to Cyprian’s notion that infants would suffer condemnation for the apostasy of their parents.<sup>90</sup>

In these early centuries the church did not have a cohesive response to the practical theologian’s interpretive question “Why?” The conversion in 387 CE of the brilliant intellectual who became Saint Augustine led to an explanation that would have enormous impact on Christian history. His development of Genesis 3 into the concept of original sin described two natures in humanity - created and fallen – the second of which crippled the first. Infants were thus born with a burden of sin passed on from Adam, a corruption that “disordered desire and vitiated the will.”<sup>91</sup> This burden, according to a compelling logic evolved through Augustine’s controversies with Pelagius, was removed by baptism, which did not entirely eliminate sinful tendencies but “admitted one to the hospital of God’s grace where one spent a lifetime convalescing.”<sup>92</sup>

This redemptive purpose was one answer to Practical Theology’s third question: “How does what is happening reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ?” but not the only one. In fourth century churches, baptism into the Christian faith signified not only the conversion of one’s fallen human

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<sup>87</sup> From the outset, however, there was great uncertainty as to confirmation’s meaning. Did it signify the reception of the Holy Spirit or was this something given fully at baptism? Was it a strengthening rite or a completing rite? Osmer, “Restructuring Confirmation.” P 50

<sup>88</sup> Cyprian said that delaying baptism by a few days would be “denying the grace and mercy of God”. William Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 3 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1979). Volume 1 p 233. This view is held by some contemporary theologians who claim that “to refuse baptism when it is requested is to attempt to restrict the grace of God.” Stacey, quoted in Mark Dalby, *Open Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1989). p37 See also Colin Buchanan, *Policies for Infant Baptism*, Grove Booklet, vol. 98 (Grove, 1987). p7

<sup>89</sup> John Chrysostom, *Baptismal Instructions*, ed. Paul Harkins, Ancient Christian Writers, vol. 31 (New York: Newman, 1963). p 52

<sup>90</sup> J Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius* (London: SPCK, 1987).extract 195, pp 216 -7

<sup>91</sup> See Martha Ellen Stortz, “Where or When Was Your Servant Innocent? Augustine on Childhood,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J Bunge (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 2001). Pp 91 - 93

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. P 95

nature, but renunciation of the pagan world ruled by Satan. Rites for an adult Catechumen in places like North Africa included turning to the west, spitting on Satan, and rejecting his “works and pomps”, while a child at baptism was blown on by the priest, marked with the sign of the cross and rubbed with the salt of healing.<sup>93</sup> In a world that believed in demons, such protection was essential; denying it to unbaptised children would be cruel and neglectful.

Augustine had a soft heart for children, who in his day were extremely vulnerable to disease, but his dogmatic conclusions about sin, evil and baptism left him no alternative but to consign unbaptised children to eternal punishment. Later thinkers expanded the doctrine to include the notion of utter depravity, but Augustine’s own thinking was more nuanced.<sup>94</sup> Between romantic notions of childhood purity, and pessimistic conclusions about demon-possession, he found a “grey area of non-innocence”.<sup>95</sup> Infants with no language or reason had little or no accountability, but as these abilities developed, they became increasingly accountable for their own sins, which after the age of seven must be dealt with by the sacraments of the church.<sup>96</sup>

Baptism has often been seen by parents as necessary for their child’s salvation, but Saint Augustine resisted an automatic connection between baptism and forgiveness, preferring a process model where one spent the rest of one’s lifetime receiving treatment in the “hospital of grace”.<sup>97</sup> However the converts of those early centuries, and the successive generations of parents to follow, would probably not have understood such a distinction. Popular piety came to interpret the association between baptism and forgiveness to mean the rite was some kind of “salvific injection” by which parents could protect their newborn children.<sup>98</sup> In the Mediaeval era, the alternative destination was described as “limbo,” a non-biblical notion that infants who died unbaptised spent eternity on the limbus (edge or border) between heaven and hell. There they would not “see God”, but neither would they suffer the torments of the truly damned.<sup>99</sup> Limbo as

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid. P 9 6

<sup>94</sup> This doctrine is one of the key points of Calvinism, see eg Herman Hanko, Hoeksema, Homer, and Van Baren, Gise J., *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grandville: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1976).

<sup>95</sup> Stortz. P 100

<sup>96</sup> The tradition of assigning the age of discretion to age seven goes back centuries. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Holy See, accessed 2005); available from [http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc\\_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a2.htm](http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a2.htm). Also Sacred Congregation for the Clergy, "General Catechetical Directory," (Holy See, 1971).

<sup>97</sup> Stortz. P 95

<sup>98</sup> Buchanan, 1987, p4

<sup>99</sup> Seeing God (the beatific vision) is an important Catholic doctrine based on Matthew 5: 8

the penalty for original sin for those children who died outside the arms of mother church came into favour in the time of Pope Innocent, but was never officially endorsed by the papacy.<sup>100</sup>

In the Middle Ages the family bore primary responsibility for teaching children the faith; at baptisms parents and godparents were required to give evidence that they knew the Creed and the Lord's Prayer by heart. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, manuals were written for parents and even for children, whose attendance at confession was used by priests to assess the quality of parental instruction and supplement it when necessary. None of this teaching, however, was formally integrated into the rite of confirmation. Indeed, debates about its meaning continued throughout the Middle Ages. Not until the reform movements of the sixteenth century would confirmation become an intentional "liturgical-educational" practice across the churches.<sup>101</sup>

By the twentieth century, Roman Catholic attitudes to the sacramental function of baptism were still remarkably instrumental. "The church's teaching stands firm", said Jesuit John Hardon, a contributor to an ecumenical conference in 1968. *"A child of one week, when baptised, receives what we call sanctifying grace; restoration of friendship with God, membership in the church and a likeness to the Saviour which no one except those baptised with water and the Holy Spirit will enjoy."*<sup>102</sup> This era prior to the Second Vatican Council 1962 – 65 time when most Catholic children were educated by the church and a review of Catholic practice described the regular routine:

**The baptism of babies was slotted into the parish Sunday afternoon calendar; it seemed enough just to turn up and get it done. It was as if everyone knew and accepted what it meant; freeing the child from original sin, a guard against limbo should the baby die...preparation for parents and the community involvement, participation in the rites were not considered important.**<sup>103</sup>

Some changes in thinking did occur but a 1980 guide for New Zealand Catholic parents still declared *"baptism frees us from the power and might of sin."* A decade later the same author claimed: *"When a sacrament is celebrated with ritual gestures and words, God is present and*

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<sup>100</sup> Brian Butler, "Infant Salvation: An Ecumenical Problem," *Foundations* XIV (1971). Note that the Catholic Church is reviewing the status of the unbaptised child, Brendan Daly Personal Communication 2005

<sup>101</sup> Osmer, "Restructuring Confirmation." P 52

<sup>102</sup> John Hardon, "Believers' Baptism and the Sacrament of Confirmation," *Foundations* XI, no. 2 (1968). P 134

<sup>103</sup> Commission National Liturgy, "Christian Initiation," in *Exploring the Liturgy: Becoming Christian* (Auckland: Religious Education Centre, 1996). p2

*active amongst his people....when the baptismal water is poured out by the priest, the spirit of Jesus Christ is poured out on the child and on the community who love and support that child*

<sup>104</sup> However the pragmatic question of the Practical Theologian - "What refinements of these practices would mirror God more clearly?" - has received attention as the Catholic communion increasingly recognises dangers in the instrumental approach. The same Jesuit who identified baptism with sanctifying grace also noted that the years following the initiatory rite are critical; baptised children may grow in age but not always in wisdom and grace. Confirmation may bring an increase and deepening of baptismal grace but "does not magically guarantee (the faith relationship) the person has done nothing to keep alive."<sup>105</sup>

Twentieth century Catholic and Protestant scholarship had examined the history and theology of infant baptism in the New Testament church and revealed considerable doubt as to the apostolic authority of the practice. <sup>106</sup> Vatican II enlarged the thinking on these matters and helped Catholics to recapture some other perspectives from the tradition, and to realise more of the rich meaning of baptism and the joy of discipleship.<sup>107</sup> The rite of Baptism for children was among the first of the sacramental rites to be revised as the *Novus Ordo* of 1973. Its refinements included refocussing the faith dimension in baptism, describing faith as a treasure of the church, and affirming that it is this corporate faith, proclaimed by the parents, and others, into which children who are too young to profess personal faith are baptised. <sup>108</sup> The prime consideration is seen to be the spiritual welfare of the child, who is "not to be deprived of baptism in his first weeks, though the priest may decide to defer baptism if parents are not yet prepared to profess faith. <sup>109</sup> The rite was elucidated to specify that water is used for immersion or pouring in the Triune name of God, and followed by anointing with chrism, and a ritual opening of ears to the Word.<sup>110</sup>

The practical concern to accurately reflect the gospel led to wide ranging debates about baptism in the postconciliar Catholic church, with extremes characterised by Perrey's call for the total

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<sup>104</sup> Judith Evans, *Welcome Christian: Family Book* (Sydney: Dove Communications, 1980). p44 and Judith Evans, *Beloved Sons and Daughters* (Sydney: Collins Dove, 1991).p34

<sup>105</sup> Hardon. P 133

<sup>106</sup> New Testament Scholars who examined this issue at great length were Jeremias and Kurt Aland. See K Stasiak, "Baptism of Infants," in *New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, ed. Berard Marthaler (Washington DC: Catholic University of America/Thomson Gale, 2003).

<sup>107</sup> National Liturgy.1996, p2

<sup>108</sup> Divine Worship. PP 29 - 30

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. p 31

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. p 33

abandonment of infant baptism, and at the other end of the continuum, the assertion that the Novus Ordo rite had vitiated the salvific dimension of the sacrament.<sup>111</sup> The “Mature Adulthood” reform movement, led by Father Aidan Kavanagh, was more moderate, and exerted considerable influence.<sup>112</sup> Those who subscribed to this view wanted baptism to be an occasion of verbal profession of mature faith, preferably by the candidate, or at least by the sponsors. Proponents came from different motivations, but all were concerned to improve the quality of faith and church life, which they felt had been impoverished by indiscriminate baptisms that were often private and perfunctory.<sup>113</sup> Although it is not mentioned specifically as a factor, it could be argued that the timing of these vigorous discussions coincided with the global rise of the charismatic movement, and with widespread spiritual renewal in Catholic parishes. The charismatic renewal exposed the malaise of traditional churches where “baptised persons profess a form of indifferentness or something close to atheism”, and challenged Catholics to personal faith and fresh commitment as disciples of Christ.<sup>114</sup> There is little doubt that modern individualism was also drawing many in the church toward a different ecclesiology – more of a ‘gathered-church’ mentality, a new vision of the church as comprising deeply committed persons with enthusiastic faith.

Popular piety, under the traditional *ex opere operato* rubric of efficacy, had perhaps perceived baptism as a magic wand, or a surgical procedure, requiring little on the part of the parents or community.<sup>115</sup> Nevertheless the 1971 Catechism reminded congregations that the task of evangelisation applies whether the subjects are baptised or not.<sup>116</sup> That is an interesting notion, since the baptised are already supposed to be saved, forgiven, and graced with the Spirit. Clearly there is more to baptism than *ex opere operato*! The Mediaeval mistake, observed Anglo Catholic Gregory Dix in a landmark paper in 1946, had been the dissociation of faith from teaching, and in allowing infant baptism to be thought of as normative. Without a conscious

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<sup>111</sup> On Perrey, see Paul Covino, “The Postconciliar Infant Baptism Debate in the American Catholic Church,” *Worship* 56, no. 3 (1982). p 243. For extreme conservatism, see Lucian Pulvermacher, *The Vatican II Rite of Baptism - for Children - "Is It Valid?"*(??, accessed 13 June 2005); available from <http://www.truecatholic.org/baptismv2.htm>.

<sup>112</sup> Those calling for reform also included the Environmentalist school; both terms coined by Nathan Mitchell in 1975; see Covino. p 242

<sup>113</sup> Aidan Kavanagh, “Baptism and Christian Initiation,” *Worship* 46.p 64

<sup>114</sup> General Catechetical Directory 1971, accessed 2005, see also Raymond Burnish, *The Meaning of Baptism: A Comparison of the Rites of the Fourth Century with Those of the Present Day*. (London: Alcuin SPCK, 1985). P 122 and Cardinal Leon Suenens, *Ecumenism and Charismatic Renewal: Theological and Pastoral Orientations* (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1978).

<sup>115</sup> Covino.p 245 and Kavanagh.

<sup>116</sup> General Catechetical Directory 1971, and Burnish. p122



response of faith, it is always “half a sacrament”.<sup>117</sup> The Catholic reform movement took the same view, the practice of Infant Baptism was licit but abnormal, and could only be sustained on the basis of parental commitment that the child would be formed in the faith into which they were baptised, in order to lead them to personal commitment.<sup>118</sup>

That this concept had become a seriously-held Catholic position is attested by the attention paid to it by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1980.<sup>119</sup> Acknowledging that some people propose reverting to the New Testament pattern where baptism presupposes hearing of the Word, conversion and personal faith, the teachers warn the church about jeopardising an essential doctrine - the necessity of baptism. Faith is important, but in baptism it can be the corporate faith of the church, the whole company of saints, into which the child is baptised.<sup>120</sup> Appealing to Scripture (John 3: 5), Tradition (immemorial practice) and Papal injunction (Paul VI in 1968), the document defends the baptism of infants as a valid sign of this faith, the unique means of ensuring a child's entry into eternal happiness.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless it is conceded that there are limits to the church's practice, and that under normal circumstances parental consent and a founded (reasonable) hope of a Christian upbringing will be required.<sup>122</sup>

This aspect of founded hope is taken so seriously in the documents of the last twenty-five years that it has opened up a pathway for baptism to be delayed, or even refused, if insufficient assurance is given regarding formation in the faith.<sup>123</sup> The fate of the child left unbaptised is not perceived as the terrifying prospect it was in former generations; no reference is now made to the mediaeval device of Limbo, only an appeal to God's mercy. The Catholic theology of salvation of the unbaptised in general, and of infants in particular, is generally still considered unresolved, but today there is no relegation of these babes to unconsecrated ground without a

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<sup>117</sup> Gregory Dix, *The Theology of Confirmation in Relation to Baptism* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1946). p 37 For the Orthodox awareness of faith as a process see also Zernov.p 80

<sup>118</sup> Covino. Pp 245, 250..

<sup>119</sup> Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on Infant Baptism," in *Vatican Council II: More Postconciiliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery (Newport: Costello Publishing Company, 1980). P 103

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. p 107

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. P 106

<sup>122</sup> See deference to original culture of a Jewish orphan in Poland in Zenit.org, *When Karol Wojtyla Refused to Baptise an Orphan*(Zenit.org, 2005, accessed 2005).

<sup>123</sup> The most recent canons have softened the idea of ‘refusal’ into a more pastorally appropriate ongoing ‘delay’. See John Beal, Coriden, James, and Green, Thomas, ed., *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (New York: Paulist Press, 2000).p 1056

funeral mass.<sup>124</sup> However the church has never gone to the logical extent of solving the problem by declaring all infants covered by the intention of the Church.<sup>125</sup>

Contemporary Catholic scholarship in the field of Christian education has also influenced the church's thinking about infant baptism. Karl Rahner's rejection of the Neo-Scholastic exaltation of reason in favour of a simpler view of God as infinite mystery, present in the created world and especially in the experience of childhood, laid the foundation for a more creation-centered view of infancy.<sup>126</sup> From the midseventies onward, his teaching focused Catholic thinking on the way God is operative at every level of human experience, including infancy. Rahner's view of original sin is more optimistic than that of Augustine and his successors; a child is "born into a history of sin", but is nevertheless "encompassed by God's love through the pledge of his saving grace" in Christ.<sup>127</sup> The 1971 Catechetical Directory noted that the first roots of religious and moral life - a child's trusting spirit - depends on their relationship with mother and father, nourished by "sharing their joyfulness and by experiencing their loving authority."<sup>128</sup> Over the last twenty years, James Fowler's analysis of the unfolding stages of faith has explicated this hopeful theology, and recognized the crucial task of formation in the faith, which begins as the infant senses structures of meaning long before they can sort out the values and beliefs of their parents.<sup>129</sup>

Although Infant Baptism is still prevalent in Catholic communities, the postconciliar Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults has come to prominence in recent years. This 1972 reform was partly driven by a concern that the decline of active interest in the Catholic Church in Europe was associated with inadequate perceptions of the meaning of baptism.<sup>130</sup> The new rite aims to restore the 'process nature' of Christian Initiation, and since 1987 its four stages have become the normal pathway for adults joining the Catholic Church.<sup>131</sup> The Rite of Christian Initiation of

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<sup>124</sup> Schillebeeckx 1963, also Kaspar 1970 who suggests the children of believing parents are encompassed by 1 Cor 7.14; quoted in Brendan Daly, "Canonical Requirements on the Part of Parents in Cases of Infant Baptism" (Saint Paul University, 1986). P 187 -188

<sup>125</sup> See baptism of desire, Butler. P 345

<sup>126</sup> See Mary Ann Hinsdale, "Infinite Openness to the Infinite: Karl Rahner's Contribution to Modern Catholic Thought on the Child," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J Bunge (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 2001). P 416

<sup>127</sup> Rahner 1975, in *Ibid.* p 424

<sup>128</sup> Clergy.

<sup>129</sup> Fowler, *The Stages of Faith*. P 16f

<sup>130</sup> The impetus also derived from Capuchin Fathers' missionary experience in Africa. See Burnish. P 133 - 145

<sup>131</sup> Each stage is marked by a "user-friendly community rite" as a signifying the transformative meaning of baptism: Inquiry, Catechesis, Lenten preparation for baptism, and Easter post-baptismal mystagogy or deepening of understanding. See General Synod Church of England, *On the Way: Towards an Integrated Approach to Christian Initiation* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995). P 32

Adults has brought about far-reaching changes in parish life – with burgeoning involvement of lay leaders, development of extensive libraries of catechetical resources, and restoration of the missional nature of the local church. Yet even here an objective aspect to the action of baptism is clear. There is an impressive air about the final act of baptism, held during the Easter vigil - the candidate dies and rises with Christ between nightfall and dawn on Easter morning.'<sup>132</sup> The Catholic position at the God's Gift end of the Grace-Response continuum means a high view of baptism is still held, as expressed in Canon 849:

**Through baptism men and women are freed from sin, are reborn as children of God and, configured to Christ by an indelible character, are incorporated into the church.**<sup>133</sup>

Today this is more about adult catechumens than infants. The authorised commentary on the Canons notes that despite the popular notion that infant baptism is insurance against limbo, the sense of urgency has now shifted from the baptism itself to the catechesis of the parents, assisting them in the task of Christian parenthood. Their sincerity in this will be "evidenced by their own practice of the faith and that they do not view baptism as a mere social convention."

<sup>134</sup> Balanced with this is the church's conviction that baptism is a Cause as well as a Sign of faith, that the sacrament elicits the enlightenment of the soul:

**Baptism as God's act is an open act, an inviting and enabling act which can effect faith...because God's action in the sacrament is bound up with the community of faith, baptism cannot be properly administered or interpreted apart from the life of that community. Hence the baptism of adults who can articulate the faith is normative...but once the community of faith exists, it cannot exclude from it those who are born into it by assuming that all forms of faith and growth in grace depend upon the attainment of a certain age or a specific level of doctrinal comprehension or ethical discrimination. Because what is proclaimed through baptism can elicit faith, the baptism of the children of the faithful is not merely appropriate but important.**<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Tudge 1988, p16

<sup>133</sup> Beal, ed. P 1034

<sup>134</sup> Commentary on Canon 867, Ibid. p 1055

<sup>135</sup> Laurence Stookey, "Personal and Community Faith in Relation to Baptist and Other Rites of Christian Initiation," *Review and Expositor* LXXVII, no. 1 (1980). pp 74- 76

**FIGURE TWO: Catholic Views on Theology of Infant Initiation**

Practice	Invocation, liberal use of water, anointing, threefold name, declaration of gospel, testimony, parental commitment, laying on hands and prayer over child - termed Baptism
What God does	Takes initiative of grace, frees from original sin and (if over 7) forgives personal sin, gives eternal life, bestows indelible character and Spirit, incorporates into Body Of Christ, gives child strength to do good
What the church does	Clergy oversee administration, timing and validity of sacraments, faith of whole company of saints validates efficacy of baptism, invokes Christ blessing on family, offers ongoing and age-appropriate catechesis and pastoral care to parents and child, grants Eucharistic rights at profession of faith
What the parents do	Give thanks for gift of child, ask for baptism, must be committed to task of Christian parenthood and provide a reasonable hope of the child attending worship and being formed in the faith into which they are baptised, pass values and morals on to child
What the child does	"Passive" recipient but from creation has awareness of God and openness to infinite, may remember rite depending on age
Sin	Child is born into corrupted creation, a history of original sin, with inner tendencies which, once they become conscious, show a propensity for selfishness, child not responsible for own sins until 7 years
Faith	Faith is important, but can be of godparents or whole church, infant baptism makes most sense if parents are true followers of Jesus
Salvation	Baptism is seen as "necessary" for salvation, child is made holy by baptism and gifted with life and the Spirit, but salvation is a lifelong response to that gift
Fate of unbaptised	Augustine - lost, Middle Ages - limbo, baptism "of intention" sometimes invoked, today usually entrusted to grace of God and his salvific will
Profession of personal faith	Confirmation is sacramental completion of baptism, normally after age seven, or when asked for, includes renewal of baptismal vows and public profession of baptismal faith, may precede or follow participation in Eucharist. Unbaptised adults coming to faith are baptised and confirmed in one rite
Bible passages utilised	<b>Mark 10: 14</b> - let the children come to me, <b>Acts 2: 38</b> - you will receive, <b>Matthew 28: 20</b> - go and baptise, <b>Romans 6: 4</b> - baptised into union with Christ, <b>John 3: 5</b> - born anew of water and Spirit

## CHAPTER 4: INFANT RITES AND “BAPTISTS”

The generic name “Baptist” applies to the stream of Christianity which emphasises the symbolic aspects of baptism, and reserves the rite, which they term ordinance rather than sacrament, for those old enough to make a personal response to God, and to publicly profess that faith in baptism.<sup>136</sup> This may include children but definitely not babies. Followers of this credobaptist tradition have often taken the view that to baptise anyone other than a conscious believer is a scandalous appeal to magic. Today most would be a little more charitable in recognising the sincerity of Paedobaptist traditions, but would still say such a rite promotes a false understanding of responding to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith. Their answer to the Practical Theology questions would be that baptism applied to infants does not in fact “reflect the gospel of Jesus Christ”. In acknowledging the special grace of a Christian upbringing, the “Baptist” tradition may offer a ritual of Infant Presentation, sometimes called Dedication, though its practitioners usually strenuously deny that this is sacramental or a ‘dry baptism’. Churches that belong to this section of the spectrum are Baptists, Mennonite Brethren, Open Brethren, Independent Pentecostal fellowships and Seventh Day Adventists.

Although the Christian church may have baptised infants from earliest times, the thinking of modern “Baptists” can be seen foreshadowed in the third century writer Tertullian who had grave doubts about infant baptism. One of his reasons was the question of personal accountability as against vicarious faith. “Let children be made Christians, when they have become competent to know Christ,” he said.<sup>137</sup> The “Baptist” tradition notes how the word sacrament comes from the Latin *sacramentum*, ‘a vow’, an oath of allegiance, and that John Chrysostom used the expression ‘contract’ in relation to baptism.<sup>138</sup> This pledge aspect was evident in the eighth century call to believers to remember their baptismal promises to love the Lord, visit the sick, give tithes and alms and receive the Eucharist.<sup>139</sup> This is interpreted by credobaptists to signify vows made at a point of mature faith with a clear ethical dimension.

The Middle Ages saw the development of an underground of movements, sects and heresies which dissented from the teachings of the Roman church. A common thread of many these

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<sup>136</sup> Here adults = believers mature enough to testify to faith

<sup>137</sup> Tertullian, quoted in D Bridge, and Phypers, D, *The Water That Divides* (London: IVP, 1977). P 83

<sup>138</sup> Liam Walsh, *The Sacraments of Initiation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1988). P 22

<sup>139</sup> Charles Deweese, *Defining Baptist Convictions: Guidelines for the Twentyfirst Century* (Franklin: Providence House, 1996), p106

groups was an objection to paedobaptism, as resting on superstition and religiosity. 'Adult' baptism appeared preferable, as a sign of salvation by faith and a testimony to the grace of God in the life of a believer.<sup>140</sup> Some of these disparate groups contributed to the rise in the sixteenth century of the much-persecuted Anabaptist movement in Germany and Switzerland. However, the popular label Anabaptist, literally meaning rebaptiser, is an unacceptable misnomer to credobaptists, who do not baptise again Christians who have already received Believer's Baptism in another communion.<sup>141</sup> For "Baptists" who consider Infant Sprinkling to be inappropriate use of the term baptism, to baptise someone who has received that rite is not rebaptising.

The history of the "Baptist" movement in Britain is complex. The General Baptists were English Separatists who wanted to form independent congregations where baptism was restricted to confessing believers.<sup>142</sup> In 1608 they fled persecution by escaping to the Continent where they were influenced by Dutch Anabaptists called the Mennonite Brethren.<sup>143</sup> The Particular Baptists also originated in England during the seventeenth century, emerging out of the Puritan-Separatist movement in a time of intense religious reform in the state Church of England.<sup>144</sup> In 1677, these English believers, who were Protestants rather than Anabaptists, described baptism as "a sign of the candidate's fellowship with Christ's death and resurrection, of his being engrafted into him, of remission of sins, and of his giving up to God through Jesus Christ to live and walk in newness of life."<sup>145</sup> The "Baptist" tradition then derives from two main streams, Particular Baptists going back to the Reformers, and General Baptists tracing their descent from the Anabaptists.<sup>146</sup> They share not just a conviction about the appropriate age for and mode of baptism, but also an understanding of the nature of the church. The 'gathered' ecclesiology of the credobaptism tradition defines the church as responsive individual Christians "knit unto the Lord and to each other upon their own confession of faith."<sup>147</sup> By contrast, the Paedobaptist

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<sup>140</sup> Bridge, pp 86 – 92. In the Waldensians, the reform was to a theologically 'purer' version of infant baptism.

<sup>141</sup> (even if it was by sprinkling). George Beasley-Murray, "A Baptist Interpretation of the Place of the Child in the Church," *Foundations* VIII, no. 2 (1965).p 388

<sup>142</sup> The name General refers to the view that Christ's atonement was for everyone.

<sup>143</sup> See Leon McBeth, *Baptist Beginnings* (Baptist History and Heritage Society, accessed 2005); available from <http://www.baptisthistory.org/baptistbeginnings.htm>.

<sup>144</sup> The name Particular refers to the Calvinist view that Christ's atonement was for the elect

<sup>145</sup> Second London Confession, see Morris West, "Towards a Possible Agenda," *Review and Expositor* LXXVII, no. 1 (1980). p14. Another document asserted that baptism is "a mystical marriage...and striking of a covenant betwixt Christ and a believer. (quoted in Deweese, p107)

<sup>146</sup> It must be acknowledged that some General Baptists such as the Landmark Baptists and the Baptists Briders", trace their 'line of blood' back to John the Baptist who they see as the first Baptist. McBeth, (accessed 2005)..

<sup>147</sup> Helwys, quoted in Deweese. p 104

perspective tends to refer to the Church as “an ontologically-given community” into which the baptised is incorporated; this is a question of ecclesiology.<sup>148</sup>

A contemporary Swiss theologian presenting a paper at an ecumenical dialogue offered a “Baptist” answer to Practical Theology’s asking “Why?” of his tradition's practice of believer's baptism (by immersion). It takes seriously, he said, “the voluntary nature of faith on one hand, and the responsibility and dignity of the individual in his relationship with God on the other.”<sup>149</sup> The stress is on public confession in word and deed; “Baptists” reject infant baptism because in their view it is an improper liturgical expression of New Testament theology and practice. The same contributor asked rhetorically whether the voluntary nature of faith can be maintained, when children “with no faith of their own, no choice of their own, no response of their own, no confession of their own’ are taught that God has acted to bring them into the church?”<sup>150</sup> This tradition challenges the Catholic concept of *ex opere operato* - the belief that the orderly use of the sacrament has in itself the power of injecting God's grace into human lives, irrespective of the qualities or merits of the person receiving it. Applying the ordinance to unaware infants can only result, to the “Baptist” view, in “millions of baptised pagans.”<sup>151</sup> For them, it is the efficacious work of the gospel which can be spoken of in this instrumental way, not the human action of baptism.

This does not mean that modern “Baptists” do not appreciate the primacy of God's grace in salvation, and in recent times they have been concerned to rediscover the rich meaning of baptism.<sup>152</sup> Nineteenth-century Baptists had viewed baptism as symbolic, a mere sign and not in any sense a sacramental conveyor of grace or regeneration.<sup>153</sup> In the mid-twentieth century R.E.O. White's landmark work on Christian initiation advocated Baptist recovery of a “true apostolic sacramentalism, giving due place to what God does in baptism” when the subject is a believing hearer of the gospel. The criticism from other traditions that a too-strong emphasis on the human faith response can lead to an unbiblical individualism, and a theologically impoverished practice, does have some weight.<sup>154</sup> Some credobaptists see the dangers of the “human-centred approach” where baptism can seem a merit prize; perceptive insiders concede

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<sup>148</sup> West.p15

<sup>149</sup> Thorwald Lorenzen, “Baptists and Ecumenicity with Special Reference to Baptism,” *Review and Expositor* LXXVII, no. 1 (1980). p22

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. p28

<sup>151</sup> McClandon 1966, quoted Ibid. p 23.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid. p 35 and see below.

<sup>153</sup> This was also the view of the Swiss reformer Zwingli, who nevertheless baptised babies.

<sup>154</sup> Davies, 1986, art on Baptism

that their tradition may have under-valued the significance of baptism.<sup>155</sup> An official British Baptist statement in 1984 acknowledged that the actual experience is “unforgettable, beyond symbolism, God does something,” and another counselled the baptised to expect a positive and permanent spiritual effect from the rite.<sup>156</sup> Thus even for this tradition, baptism is more than a sign - it is a genuine means of grace in which God uses material media as the vehicle.<sup>157</sup>

Thus the believer's baptism point of view cherishes God's gracious gift of himself, but notes that God does not “throw his grace at us,” instead offering himself in loving invitation.<sup>158</sup> Faith is worked by God and willed by human beings, and expressed in baptism, primarily something the Christian does, an outward sign witnessing to an inner belief.<sup>159</sup> Our task is to respond to God in Christ - and this is the point of the other pole of the Grace-Response continuum.<sup>160</sup> The ecumenical dialogues of recent times have attempted to find common ground between “Baptists” and other traditions. In *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the commentary hopefully stated that “the differences between Infant and Believers' Baptism become less sharp when it is recognized that both forms embody God's own initiative in Christ, and express a response of faith made within the believing community.”<sup>161</sup> However the responses to Lima suggest the text had too easily dismissed a fundamental incompatibility between Infant and Believer's Baptism, and from “Baptists” a guarded optimism was coupled with a plea not to over-simplify complex issues.<sup>162</sup>

Debating the validity of baptism for infants does not resolve for “Baptists” the underlying theological question of the child's relation to Christ and the church. Although credobaptists refute the Paedobaptist rhetoric about leaving children to the devil, they have yet to arrive at an agreed theology of the child.<sup>163</sup> The children of believers are seen to be within the operational realm of the Holy Spirit, but churches that do not baptise infants often have no standard

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<sup>155</sup> Pawson. p12 Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow*. p89

<sup>156</sup> Burnish., p148, 155

<sup>157</sup> Thurian.vol 1, p 148. White notes that if baptism is purely symbolic there is no reason not to use it at every crisis of religious experience. See White.p 306

<sup>158</sup> Lorenzen. p23

<sup>159</sup> Janet Crawford, "Baptism from the Inside," *Journeyings* Supplement 2 (1992).p 54

<sup>160</sup> Any accusation of Pelagianism can be dismissed on the basis that Baptists make it clear that God's grace comes first and our salvation is utterly dependent on Him

<sup>161</sup> BEM 12,5.

<sup>162</sup> J. Jayakiran Sebastian, *Infant Versus Believers' Baptism: Search for Ecumenical Understanding*(nd, accessed 2005); available from <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1501>.

<sup>163</sup> Keith Clements, "Baptist Theology," in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Alan Richardson and John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1983). Cf with Paul Jewett, *Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1978). p219



procedure for recognizing them as part of the visible church.<sup>164</sup> Many questions are left unanswered: “Are “Baptist” babies saved? If so on what basis? Are they without sin or are they beneficiaries of the grace of God? What is the work of the Spirit in a credobaptist family? Is it any different from the work of the Spirit in a baptised child? Are these children to be taught to say ‘Our Father’?”<sup>165</sup> In practice “Baptists” have treated their children as Covenant children, and in the absence of a suitable rite to acknowledge saving role of family, developed a new one – Infant Dedication.

In early “Baptist” thinking children were usually seen as innocent until the age of accountability; prior to that it was assumed that God unilaterally ascribed his grace to them.<sup>166</sup> Menno Simons’ theology was more subtle; he ascribed to infants a “complex innocence” whereby children exhibit neither wilful disobedience nor intentional faithfulness.<sup>167</sup> Because they cannot reasonably distinguish right from wrong, they cannot be held accountable for sinful actions, but neither can they make the moral decisions necessary for a life of discipleship.<sup>168</sup> However they are part of God’s kingdom, covered by God’s broad grace and the protection offered by the atonement, which applies not just to children of believers, but to all children.<sup>169</sup> This tradition never assumed that children were members of the church, but neither did it focus on depravity and the need for conversion; the goal was not the emotion-filled decision of today’s evangelicals, but a gradual embracing of the faith through integrative nurturance.<sup>170</sup>

In the nineteenth century, a time when many “Baptists” were suspicious of ceremony and casual in their liturgy, British pastor John Clifford was asked by Christian parents how they could associate their children with the church and receive its prayers. He began a practice of “infant dedication”, first in homes and later in the church.<sup>171</sup> Historians see in this rite a resemblance to the practice of the eighth century Paulician sect, which denied infant baptism but had a home-

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<sup>164</sup> Lorenzen. P 26

<sup>165</sup> Kevin Roy, *Baptism Reconciliation and Unity* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997).p 34

<sup>166</sup> Moller. p123

<sup>167</sup> Keith Graber Miller, "Complex Innocence, Obligatory Nurturance and Parental Vigilance," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J Bunge (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 2001). P 201 - 202

<sup>168</sup> Laura Kalmar, *Children and Baptism in the Mennonite Brethren Church*(2002, accessed June 13 2005); available from [www.directionjournal.org/article/?1260](http://www.directionjournal.org/article/?1260). P 3. Early Anabaptists were nevertheless pessimistic about a child’s behaviour and childrearing focussed on “breaking the will” and use of the rod.

<sup>169</sup> Miller.p 226

<sup>170</sup> Ibid. p 210

<sup>171</sup> This innovation is credited to Clifford by Child in Alec Gilmore, *Baptism and Christian Unity* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1966). Page 90

based ceremony for the blessing of infants.<sup>172</sup> Although sixteenth century Anabaptists generally had no infant rite, Hubmaier had held services of infant consecration where the child was prayed for and commended to Christ.<sup>173</sup> The Plymouth Brethren too had established a ceremony for children, and were charged with inventing a 'dry baptism'. However it seems it was the influence of John Clifford that led to the practice becoming widespread, with special hymns being written about wisdom for parents, and training and protection for the child.<sup>174</sup> There was no set liturgy, and ministers were simply guided by custom and tradition, which tended to focus on the dedication of the parents to the task of raising their children to faith.<sup>175</sup> These were in many ways pastorally-motivated 'practices in search of a theology.'<sup>176</sup> Over time, criticism that the child may as well not be there brought the spotlight back to the child herself, and services were entitled Presentatio, Blessing, or Thanksgiving, rather than Dedication.

While meaning has become more consistent, contemporary practice is chaotic, with answers to the descriptive, interpretive, normative and pragmatic questions of Practical Theology varying widely.<sup>177</sup> The German Baptist response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* said 'no special performance is required' to declare the belief that children growing up in the church live under the atonement of Christ and the protection of their parents' and church's faith.<sup>178</sup> The response of Burmese Baptists though reminded churches that practise Believer's Baptism that they should work out how to manifest their belief that all, including infants, are under God's grace and care.<sup>179</sup> A typical Infant Blessing service in Britain is described by West :

**The service of blessing takes place within the act of Sunday worship...the parents publicly thank God for the gift of a child and the gathered community shares in the thanksgiving....the parents dedicate themselves to the responsible task of Christian parenthood and of bringing up the child in the nurture of the Christian faith. In many churches the congregation itself makes a commitment.**<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> See John Knox, "The Infant Dedication Service: Some Historical and Theological Questions" (Baptist Theological College, 1977). Footnote 3, and Gilmore. P 90

<sup>173</sup> Knox. Chapter 2

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Although Hannah's dedication of the infant Samuel (I Sam 1: 27) was often used as a model, theologically ministers usually taught that a human being cannot be dedicated by anyone but themselves, so the parents were consecrating themselves to the tasks of Christian parenthood. See <http://www.christiancourier.com/feature/april2002.htm>

<sup>176</sup> West. P 9

<sup>177</sup> The same could of course be said of infant baptism in the non-liturgical churches!

<sup>178</sup> Thurian. Vol 4 p195

<sup>179</sup> Ibid. p186

<sup>180</sup> West.p19f . Neville Clark suggests both infant baptism and infant dedication are practices in search of a theology. See Knox.Footnotes 14. and 15

Practical Theology asks of “Baptists” who practice forms of infant initiation, what is understood by the blessing of infants? Services almost always make use of the motif of Jesus blessing the children, though many would say this was not an initiation paradigm<sup>181</sup>. The word blessing itself can be interpreted in an obviously sacramental sense, to mean that something actually happens to the infant through the activity of God. It could also be taken more simply, to mean that there is at this point a recognition of the blessing with which God has already graced the child, in the work of Jesus Christ. For this reason, some “Baptists” argue for the blessing of children to be offered to unchurched families as well as believers, as an expression of God’s unconditional love for all children, whatever their parentage.<sup>182</sup> Still, the fact that the “Baptist” theology of the child appears faint, does not lead them to treat their own children as exiles from grace.<sup>183</sup> It is acknowledged by “Baptists” that children born of believing parents do have an advantage over other children, at least in so far as they more easily hear and are influenced by the gospel, though they are still seen as sinners for whom Christ died.

Most “Baptists” accept the Biblical understanding of the universality of human sin, though often the misapprehensions associated with the technical term Original Sin are avoided, by the use of terms like “inborn sinfulness.”<sup>184</sup> Children express this sinful bent in temper, obstinacy and jealousy which cannot be simply dismissed as childish naughtiness. They need salvation just as do adults, and have a capacity for understanding Bible truth and for receiving the kingdom.<sup>185</sup> However, says the “Baptist” tradition, their salvation does not depend on a physical relationship with believing parents. Because “God has no grandchildren” he does not accept people as his children simply because their parents are believers.<sup>186</sup> The grace of a Christian home is real but not to be signified by baptism; the rite of infant dedication, presentation or thanksgiving, or in some cases even participation in the Eucharist, is the preferred expression of this covenantal privilege.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Phillip Tovey, ""Can We Have the Baby Done?" Infant Initiation and Prebaptismal Rites," *Anvil* 12, no. 2 (1995). P 139

<sup>182</sup> See Gilmore. P 100 and White. P 123

<sup>183</sup> Daniel Stevick in The Murphy Center for Liturgical Research, *Made, Not Born: New Perspectives on Christian Initiation and the Catechumenate* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976). P 106

<sup>184</sup> Howard Carter, “Forbid Them Not: A Study in the Theology of Childhood and Its Relationship to Christian Education and the Principles of Church Life” (Baptist Theological College, 1967). Chapter 2

<sup>185</sup> Matthew 18: 14 which Carter notes uses the same language for little ones as Jesus uses for adults in Luke 15; 4 – 7. Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Moller. p81 - see John 1: 12

<sup>187</sup> Dave Wiebe, "Toward a Theology of Children," *Directions* 22, no. 1 (1993).p 13

In the late twentieth century years of ecumenical conversation there has been a flurry of challenges to the “Baptist” thinking on children and the church, with excellent Practical questions being asked of practices and norms. The influence of eighteenth and nineteenth century Revival movements on the “Baptist” traditions had led to a focus on guilt and depravity, and an expectation of dramatic conversions, even for children of believers. In New Zealand and elsewhere a pattern developed, whereby children growing up in the church presented themselves for multiple decisions and rededications at evangelistic crusades, until eventually being baptised in their teens.<sup>188</sup> In the sixties and seventies some had critiqued this pattern as inconsistent; if children can decide for Christ then either they can be baptised, or “Baptists” should frankly acknowledge that their ordinance is less “an outward sign of an inward change” and more a rite for those who have reached a pinnacle of spiritual maturity.<sup>189</sup> It was recognised that the children of Christian parents are not outsiders or pagans, and that as such they may be proper candidates for baptism, albeit at a much younger age than had often been thought.<sup>190</sup> Bridge and Phipers described the conundrum in Britain in 1977:

**Baptists today are usually unwilling to baptise children under the age of fourteen, yet the theological implications of this position are far reaching and difficult to reconcile with the teaching of the New Testament....little children of three and four are often far more conscious of the reality and nearness of Christ than their parents; should they be baptised?.....could it be that a serious attempt by Baptists to baptise on conversion according to the New Testament pattern would lead them inexorably and perhaps very rapidly towards a position of child baptism, little different from infant baptism.**<sup>191</sup>

There is, noted Daniel Stevick, “something normative in the life of the kingdom about a child,” yet the traditional location of Believers’ Baptism within adulthood fails to interpret and support the place of the child in the church.<sup>192</sup> Contemporary understandings of developmental psychology, and the recognition that a first-generation conversion model of Christian Initiation is inappropriate for children growing up in the faith community, has opened up an understanding of dependent faith as real faith.<sup>193</sup> Buckland’s thesis that Scripture shows children belonging to

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<sup>188</sup> Carter. Ch 6

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow*.p 106

<sup>191</sup> Bridge. p173

<sup>192</sup> Daniel Stevick, in *Made, Not Born: New Perspectives on Christian Initiation and the Catechumenate*, ed. The Murphy Center for Liturgical Research (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976). P 105

<sup>193</sup> Wiebe.

the kingdom, where they are viewed with favour by God, until they consciously (and many do) turn their back on him, has been widely embraced by "Baptist" children's ministries.<sup>194</sup> The growing awareness that God may deal preconsciously with children in the faith community, means that credobaptists are baptising children younger and younger, well before they are socially or emotionally independent.<sup>195</sup>

The question of whether faith is confined to the conscious rational experience of individual adults, or can be formed in a non-cognitive manner, through Christian nurture, has been addressed in recent writings within the Mennonite tradition. The penal substitutionary view of atonement requires a mature understanding of sin, justice and morality, but other Biblical images explain the work of Christ as restoration of a relationship rather than expiation of sin.<sup>196</sup> These explanations may be grasped by children at a much earlier age, and find expression in a childhood trust, loyalty and love, qualifying them, in the view of some, for Believer's Baptism.<sup>197</sup> Moreover, according to one Mennonite Christian educator, the subjective climate of post-modernity means baptism as a dramatic, experienced form of knowing will be more significant than a cognitive understanding of faith.<sup>198</sup> Mennonite churches are recording a surge in the number of children baptised under the age of eleven, as congregations come to value childhood in its own right, and honour the early faith experiences of children.

Practitioners of initiation rites in the "Baptist" tradition have addressed the question of 'Why?' their practices have developed and have acknowledged their theology of children is faint, and needs to more adequately reflect the gospel. In recent times some have gone deeper and asked how their practices could be modified so as to embrace more fully the priority of divine grace and the kingdom belongingness of children. Several New Zealand Baptists, for example, offer infant services which like the Anglican Blessing Ceremony celebrate new life, establish memories, and promise loving responsible parenthood without explicitly referring to the Christian gospel.<sup>199</sup> The discussion within the various denominations of baptism as part of the process of initiation, rather than founded on a common 'ordo,' is also a promising pathway that

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<sup>194</sup> Buckland. P 65

<sup>195</sup> Stevick. p 106.

<sup>196</sup> Atonement can be seen as reconciliation, promise, and triumph over the powers, see Kalmar, (accessed). P 4

<sup>197</sup> They would be treated as baptised members but not however have the full responsibility of congregational decision making. Ibid.(accessed). P 7. This is paralleled by the Reformed move to recognise "governing membership" as a fuller form than baptismal membership. David Willis, "The Development of Baptismal Theology and Practice in the Book of Confessions," in *Baptism: Decision and Growth*, ed. David Willis (Philadelphia: UPCUSA, 1972). P 34

<sup>198</sup> Kalmar, (accessed 2005). P 6

<sup>199</sup> Personal communication Steve Taylor, August 2005. Where Christian content is appropriate this is offered too.

can be explored, along with the issue of the place of the child in the church.<sup>200</sup> A summary of “Baptist” views can be found in Figure 3: “Baptist” Views on Theology of Infant Initiation.

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<sup>200</sup> Paul Fiddes, "Baptism and the Process of Christian Initiation," in *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Stanley E Porter, and Cross , Anthony R (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).p 294 ff

**FIGURE THREE: "Baptist" Views on Theology of Infant Initiation.**

Practice	Invocation, declaration of gospel, testimony, parental commitment, laying on hands and prayer over child, sometimes threefold name and anointing - termed Dedication
What God does	Takes initiative of grace, creates child with spiritual receptivity which may become faith, promises forgiveness and eternal life to those who believe, strengthens child through grace of a Christian home
What the church does	Leaders oversee administration and timing of infant dedications, invokes Christ's blessing, offers ongoing and age-appropriate catechesis and pastoral care to parents and child, grants Eucharistic rights before or after ordinance of believer's baptism
What the parents do	Give thanks for gift of child, acknowledge dependence on God, ask for blessing of God and support and pastoral care of church, often promise a Christian upbringing, pass values and morals on to child, look forward to conversion and believer's baptism
What the child does	"Passive" recipient, though some stress "kingdom belongingness", and image of God from creation, child may remember rite depending on age
Sin	Child is born into corrupted creation, has a nature impregnated with sin or an inborn sinful tendency which will inevitably draw them away from God, child usually seen as lost, or potentially lost unless make faith choice
Faith	Faith is important, and must be personal, children invited to make personal commitment, individual must be a follower of Jesus and able to give account of faith before baptism
Salvation	Conversion is necessary for salvation, adult understanding required for main metaphors of substitutionary atonement and restoration of marred relationship, believer's baptism is a witness to conversion/salvation
Fate of unbaptised	In past were seen as lost, often today entrusted to grace of God and his salvific will, in practice many treat their children as included in the covenant of grace
Profession of personal faith	Follows conversion, person must be mature enough to give account of own faith as part of immersion baptism, usually in teens or adulthood, but sometimes now at primary age, may or may not be linked with participation in Eucharist
Bible passages utilised	<b>Mark 10: 14</b> - let the children come to me, <b>Acts 2: 38</b> - repent and be baptised, <b>Matthew 28: 20</b> - go and baptise, <b>Romans 10: 13</b> - call on name and be saved, <b>Titus 3: 5</b> - washing of rebirth and renewal in Holy Spirit

## CHAPTER 5: INFANT RITES AND “REFORMED”

The churches of the European Reformation came out of the sixteenth century Roman church with a strong resistance to many things Catholic, but infant baptism was not one of them.<sup>201</sup> The generic name Reformed applies to the stream of Christianity which emphasises the covenantal nature of faith, and interprets the sacrament of baptism as a sign, not instrumentally effectual but rather a seal of what it signifies. Reformed churches today still place a great deal of emphasis on the grace of God, effective in baptism, and offer the sacrament to infant children of Christian parents, rather than following the more inclusive practice practised historically in established churches.<sup>202</sup> Churches that belong to this mid-section of the spectrum are Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, Congregationalist and to some degree, Lutheran.

The first two basic questions of Practical Theology (‘what?’ and ‘why?’) can be applied to the Reformed practices of baptism and are answered in the catechisms’ use of motifs like sign and seal to explain the interplay of divine grace and human response.<sup>203</sup> A translation of the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 defines the sacraments:

**Sacraments are holy signs and seals for us to see. They were instituted by God so that by our use of them, he might make us understand more clearly the promise of the gospel, and might put his seal upon that promise. And this is God’s promise, to forgive our sins and give us eternal life, by grace alone because of Christ’s one sacrifice finished on the cross.**<sup>204</sup>

Calvin was emphatic that the preaching of the Word creates saving faith, and the sacraments confirm it; baptism thus seals the promise of grace, ratifying it and sustaining faith in it.<sup>205</sup> In this ‘obsignatory’ view, the effect of baptismal grace is not *ex opere operato*, from the orderly use of

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<sup>201</sup> Barth suggests there were political reasons for Luther's and Calvin's “inconsistent and artificial “defence of the practice - not wanting to undermine the state-constituted *volkskirche* mindset that supported their administration. K Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* (London: SCM, 1948), p52

<sup>202</sup> Buchanan describes English clergy for the sixteenth century till today who see “baptism as every child’s birthright and promote the parish church as a national spiritual welfare service which controls the product and guarantees the provision for all.” Buchanan, *Policies for Infant Baptism*. P 4, 7

<sup>203</sup> Here the word sign simply points to a reality beyond itself, while a seal participates in the reality which it represents. In today’s ecumenical texts the word “symbol” or “effective sign” is used in the same way the reformers used seal. Standing Commission on Faith and Order, “One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition,” (Crete: World Council of Churches, 2005).22

<sup>204</sup> Douglas Brouwer, *Remembering the Faith: What Christians Believe* (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999). P 133

<sup>205</sup> J. Calvin, & Beveridge, H.. *Institutes of the Christian Religion.*, Translation of: *Institutio Christianae Religionis*; Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846.(Logos Research Systems, Inc, 1997, accessed 20 June 2005).IV,xiv, 3, 7 and 9 See also Donald Baillie, *Baptism and Conversion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964). P 30



the rite itself, but sourced more broadly in the powerful and free action of God the Holy Spirit.<sup>206</sup> Baptism however cannot be described as *nuda signa*, merely symbolic, an illustration or depiction, for God assures us by “effective presentation” that we are cleansed as surely spiritually as we are physically.<sup>207</sup> The rationale for baptism in the Reformed Tradition is strongly theocentric, grounded in the theology of election and relying not on human deeds but on God’s sovereign power attested by the resurrection.<sup>208</sup> According to Karl Barth,

**Baptism is a sign which directs us to God's revelation of eternal life...it does not merely signify eternal reality but is eternal reality because it points significantly beyond its own concreteness...it is the Lord who makes water baptism powerful for repentance and forgiveness. Water receives its special meaning, not because of anything attributed by the church, but because Jesus Christ is Lord.**<sup>209</sup>

The equilibrium between gift and response is elucidated by a number of the Reformers. Zwingli leaned heavily towards a symbolic interpretation of baptism but assured individual believers that the potency of baptism is not limited by their faith, but “grounded in the reality of the covenant of grace”.<sup>210</sup> Calvin decreed that in the external sign of baptism, the Lord seals on our conscience his promise of good will toward us, and we in our turn testify our piety towards him.<sup>211</sup> This dynamic equation of Grace/Response is seen clearly in the Reformed teaching about extending the privilege of baptism to the children of believers.

If former generations had ascribed a mystical or even magical effect to baptismal water, and applied its benefits to infants, the Reformers offered a more intellectual and reasoned explanation of why the dominical command to baptise could be extended to children. Peter’s Pentecost speech had declared that the promise of salvation was to “you and your children”, and the instances of household baptism in Acts, and Paul’s brief reference to the holiness of

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<sup>206</sup> See Westminster Confession V.3 “God makes use of means but is free to work without above or against them.”

<sup>207</sup> Bolkestein (1952) suggested Calvin took different stances on instrumentality depending on the protagonist. See G C Berkouwer, “The Sacraments as Signs and Seals,” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald McKim (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1992). P 219.

<sup>208</sup> Geoffrey Bromiley, “The Meaning and Scope of Baptism,” in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald McKim (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1992). P 238 - 242

<sup>209</sup> Barth, 1948, p20

<sup>210</sup> Quoted in Barth, 1948, p21

<sup>211</sup> Calvin, (accessed). IV/xiv/1

children of believing parents, can be invoked as Scriptural justification.<sup>212</sup> The Westminster Larger Catechism, a ruling document of the Reformed churches, declares “the visible church consists of ‘believers and their children’” and develops its theology of baptism through the Biblical concept of covenant.<sup>213</sup> While infants are too young to understand the significance of the gospel, they are nevertheless affected by the ‘seed’ of sin, and may benefit from the blessings of the covenant..<sup>214</sup> The Reformed responses to Practical Theology’s questions about how infant baptism reflects the gospel of Jesus Christ are firmly grounded in the Biblical revelation of God’s covenant grace.

The ecumenical dialogue hosted by the University of South Africa in 1983 helped unfold issues around Biblical covenant, and the Reformed emphasis on continuity between the Old and New Testaments. Christianity is grounded in Judaism and though there are important points of divergence, Reformed churches see the New Covenant as a continuation of the promises given to Abraham.<sup>215</sup> In the Jewish faith, the sign of circumcision is administered only once, but has a rich significance for one's whole life; baptism can operate in the same manner. Calvin and others used this theology to assure believing parents they could bring their children for baptism because there was good reason to trust that God’s promise to save included them.<sup>216</sup> Thus in Reformed theology, the fate of infants dying unbaptised revolved around the notion of election, and although Limbo was definitely refuted, the Catechisms hedge around the issue of general infant salvation. Not all who die in infancy are elect so some must be lost; this possibility caused much searching of hearts in nineteenth century Scotland and led to the passing of a conscience clause called the Declaratory Act.<sup>217</sup>

Luther was more instrumentally inclined, viewing baptism as a necessary duty and the moment of actual salvation, a view which he justified by imputing to children *fides infantilis*, an “inchoate

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<sup>212</sup> See T F Torrance, *A Manual of Church Doctrine According to the Church of Scotland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960).p 36 – 38 for these arguments, which evangelical Anglican Colin Buchanan deems inadequate, and “slick” especially the ‘holiness of children’ argument from I Corinthians 7: 14. Any rationale for baptising these children also leads to baptising the unbelieving partner, he says, and no one likes that conclusion. Nevertheless he defends infant baptism on other grounds. Buchanan, *A Case for Infant Baptism*.

<sup>213</sup> Covenant = a bundle of promises tied together in mutual solemnity. Source unknown.

<sup>214</sup> Barbara Pitkin, “The Heritage of the Lord: Children in the Theology of John Calvin,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J Bunge (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 2001). P 184

<sup>215</sup> See Paul in Romans 4 and A Konig, “Infant Baptism and the Covenant of Grace,” in *Infant Baptism: The Arguments for and Against*, ed. A Konig, Lederle, H, and Moller, F (Roodepoort: CUM Books, 1984). P 121

<sup>216</sup> Thus Calvin looked to the covenant rather than cleansing from original sin, for the rationale for infant baptism, and regarded consignment of unbaptised infants to hell, implied in Roman Greek Lutheran and Arminian creeds, a “detestable blasphemy.” Butler.p 348 See also Pitkin. P 182

<sup>217</sup> But the Westminster teaching on effectual calling allows that some are called without being exposed to Word and Spirit – surely deceased infants. Baillie. P 36. and Butler. P 349

yet real" infant faith.<sup>218</sup> However in the Westminster tradition it was the concept of 'Effectual Calling' that explained how baptism – infant or believer's - is made effective in a person's life by the gift of faith.

**We may think of the Word of God as the instrument employed by God to effect regeneration, but the regenerating is done, not by the gospel itself but only by the Holy Spirit who is pleased to operate through it....one who is regenerated begins to think differently, to feel differently and to will differently than before...and will thankfully accept the free offer of the gospel. So God's call becomes effectual....*'The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered'* (Westminster XXVIII.6) ...the order may be (1) baptism, effectual calling and then the efficacy of baptism, or (2) effectual calling, then baptism, then the efficacy of baptism.**<sup>219</sup>

It was through a reappropriation of the meaning of confirmation that the Reformers were able to restore the important dimension of personal faith to the understanding of Christian Initiation.<sup>220</sup> Earlier in church history Confirmation had become a sacrament separate in time from baptism, the former requiring the imposition of a bishop's hands, the latter being under the jurisdiction of the parish priest. Certain implications of conversion (eg new birth) were imputed to the infant rite, and others relegated to confirmation (eg the gift of the Holy Spirit.) Gradually the catechetical dimension, whereby baptised infants were formed in the faith, was neglected in favour of pageantry, and by the Middle Ages confirmation had become somewhat of a 'rite in search of a theology' - certainly a Biblical theology.<sup>221</sup> During the Reformation the Practical Theologian's search for "refinements that would mirror God more clearly" was foreshadowed when the concept of catechesis was reinstated and the service of confirmation focussed less on the notion of anointing with the Spirit, and more on a profession of personal faith.

As soon as baptised children were old enough, they began receiving instruction in the catechism from their parents. When they reached the "age of discretion," they joined special classes led by the minister to help them understand what they were memorizing.<sup>222</sup> They would

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<sup>218</sup> Baillie. P 23

<sup>219</sup> G Williamson, *The Westminster Confession and Commentary* (1964). P 90, 213

<sup>220</sup> The reformers rejected the Council of Trent's definition of confirmation as conveying an indelible character so that word was not used until later centuries. Osmer, "Restructuring Confirmation." P 52

<sup>221</sup> Ken Bennett, "Christian Initiation in a Pluralistic Age," *Journeyings* Supplement 2 (1992).pp 27 – 29. See also Dix, who scathingly describes confirmation in his Anglican context as "an amorphous mass of Pelagian good will." Dix.

<sup>222</sup> Osmer, "Restructuring Confirmation." P 52

then be able give clear testimony to their faith in a private pastoral act (Luther) or public profession (Calvin), prior to participation in communion. Thus the Reformed use of "confirmation" was for the candidate's subjective confirming of the faith declared at their baptism, as compared with the Catholic reference to confirmation as an objective act of the church. Objective or subjective, the point was the same: the candidate's baptism was completed or "improved" The Spirit's effectual calling enabled them to grasp the meaning of the faith declared to them in infancy, and to be worthy participants in the Eucharist.<sup>223</sup> In the Westminster Larger Catechism this effectual calling basically equated to regeneration, since those not effectually called are designated unregenerate.<sup>224</sup> Osmer notes the paradox expressed here; an emphasis on the individual's existential faith, balanced by a strong affirmation of God's electing grace.<sup>225</sup>

In the nineteenth century Friedrich Schleiermacher developed the dynamics of Reformed thinking on baptism by combining the ideas of the church's act of will (receiving into fellowship) and God's act of will (justification and union with Christ).<sup>226</sup> In infant baptism, salvation follows sacrament as the influence of Christ is experienced in the fellowship of believers. Schleiermacher's explanation of the notion that baptism and regeneration are connected but not strictly coincident, was that "the sacrament's proper efficacy is suspended until the person has really become a believer."<sup>227</sup> Later that century Presbyterians in many parts of the world were impacted by Revivalism (1850 – 1920), and the effects of "voluntarism, individualism and emotionalism" somewhat modified the traditional norms of grace, election and covenant. Confirmation classes became popular as a rite of passage where baptised individuals took the opportunity to clarify their own beliefs and decide whether or not they accept the Christian faith themselves

Twentieth Century Presbyterian teaching continued this line of thinking. A manual for New Zealand parents approved by the Doctrine Committee in 1959 declared:

**Baptism does not make a child a Christian - our church does not believe in magic. We do not believe that the sprinkling of the water is the moment necessarily of the forgiveness of sin and of God's giving eternal life to your**

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<sup>223</sup> See Bennett. p29

<sup>224</sup> 8.1 See Baillie. P 80

<sup>225</sup> Osmer, "Restructuring Confirmation." P 54

<sup>226</sup> John Riggs, *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002). P92

<sup>227</sup> Ibid. p 93

**little child We believe in something far greater - that in his own time, God will bring her to himself.** <sup>228</sup>

The theology of covenant is given as background, and the metaphor of engagement used to explain how baptism declares God's promise to this child, and looks forward to the day of the "marriage of her soul with Christ." <sup>229</sup> Nevertheless the child is addressed by name, and recognised as "a real member of the Christian family." <sup>230</sup>

This conviction that a child can be a real member of the church, yet not have the faith that brings eternal life, is another aspect of 'having it both ways' dynamic of Reformed thinking. In the same era Robert Paul distinguished three kinds of belonging: the belonging implicit in the once-for-all-ness of the atoning work of Christ, the belonging that comes when the church sets Christ's claim on an infant, and the belonging to Christ that derives from active faith and commitment. <sup>231</sup> If Paedobaptist churches are going to take this distinction seriously, he says, they must view the act of volition, usually embodied in confirmation, as an integral component of infant baptism. <sup>232</sup> Reformed thinking of the time acknowledged that the water of baptism accomplished nothing of itself, but there was a sense in which the rite was an "efficacious instrument", and grace was certainly communicated through the blessing of hearing the Word and receiving a Christian education. Then, as now, there was widespread presumption that infants dying, whether baptised or not, were embraced by the mercy of God. <sup>233</sup>

There is no question, in traditional Reformed thinking about children, that they are included in the covenant, though for those baptised as babies, the sign comes before their active faith. They are seen to be Christian children not heathens, and can pray "Our Father" with the rest of the family. <sup>234</sup> For this reason Presbyterian and other Reformed churches that do practise infant baptism usually ask the parents to make quite serious vows of faith, discipleship, and commitment to the local church. <sup>235</sup> That does not obviate the need for the child to come to their own point of repentance and faith; indeed it demands it. Baptised children must appropriate for themselves the promises made proleptically in their baptism, on the basis that they will be

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<sup>228</sup> J Graham Miller, *Baptism in the Presbyterian Church* (Christchurch: Presbyterian Bookroom, 1959). P11

<sup>229</sup> Ibid. p 12

<sup>230</sup> Ibid. p 14

<sup>231</sup> Robert Paul, *The Atonement and the Sacraments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1961). P 354

<sup>232</sup> Ibid. p 355

<sup>233</sup> Miller, *Baptism in the Presbyterian Church*. p 8

<sup>234</sup> Roy. P 23

<sup>235</sup> see appendix

incorporated into the faith community which itself is a means of grace. It seems the instrumentality here is somewhat softer than that claimed by the Catholic and Orthodox traditions; we are nearer the middle of the continuum. For those who belong to the Reformed tradition, the twin poles of grace and response, of instrument and symbol, are held in tension in a kind of theological dynamic equation. Baptism is more than merely symbolic, but its occasions and efficacy are perceived less sacramentally, with more of a community focus.<sup>236</sup>

It must be acknowledged that some Reformed thinkers fail to support the extension of baptism to children, seeing it as incompatible with the message of the New Testament. Faith, they maintain, is a prerequisite to salvation, and to include children simply because it is God who acts in baptism is to lose sight of the essential meaning - that one must present oneself for baptism.<sup>237</sup> For this reason Barth sharply opposed infant baptism as not reflecting the gospel, because it is involuntary; he regarded it "*true and effectual, but not correct...it is a wound in the body of the church.*"<sup>238</sup> The Scandinavian theologian Kierkegaard also sharply criticised infant baptism as practised in the Danish Lutheran church: "*the priests...insinuate themselves into the lying in room...under the name of baptism they present to God a ceremony where the person cannot render that which Christianity unconditionally requires...a decision for Christ.*"<sup>239</sup> This is however the minority view in Reformed churches today.

As the generations have considered how their practices may be refined in order to "mirror more accurately" the gospel of Jesus Christ, different emphases have developed, with 'wings' in Reformed thinking that favour each side of the Grace-Response equation. 'There are some who prefer the certainty of instrumental language; Reformed Christians in South Africa claim that their children are saved by infant baptism, and baptised Presbyterian children round the world are assured that they are a "child of the covenant" whose name is written in the book of life.'<sup>240</sup> The emphasis here is towards the "Gift of Grace" end of the Initiation Spectrum. One Reformed theologian describes God's saving relationship with people as so contingent on God's initiative that it can be called one-sided.<sup>241</sup> Baptism is then an act performed on behalf of God, since

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<sup>236</sup> The Reformed theology of Eucharist is also centred on the experience of community, and the rite is validly sacramental only when practised as an act of *koinonia* or participation.

<sup>237</sup> Cronje, in Konig. p117

<sup>238</sup> Barth. P 41. Nevertheless Barth passionately opposed rebaptism, since that would suggest that matters of defective church order could invalidate God's act of free grace and unchurch 90% of professing Christians. See Paul.p 345

<sup>239</sup> Kierkegaard, quoted in Jewett, 1978, p111

<sup>240</sup> Konig., p119 see also Mark Horne, *Was Fetal John the Baptist Exceptional?* [Weblog] (2004, accessed 1/2/05); available from [www.hornes.org/justmark/archives/002538](http://www.hornes.org/justmark/archives/002538).

<sup>241</sup> Konig. P 101

washing, incorporation, and union with Christ are all God's work, not ours. "One cannot baptise oneself," he points out; "the baptiser is active (and) represents God."<sup>242</sup> In a booklet for New Zealand parents, a joint publication of Presbyterian and Methodist Churches asks 'Why do we baptise our children?' The answer given is that baptism is a visible act which declares to them God's love and acceptance, assurance of his cleansing, reception as members, and the gift of the Spirit "What we believe for ourselves we can claim for our children; God's grace includes them as well as us."<sup>243</sup> At times this is expressed liturgically by moving the rite of baptism to a time in the service prior to any "pastoral conversation" about faith, parental vows or community sponsorship.<sup>244</sup>

The liturgical reform movement of the late twentieth century has encouraged some Reformed Churches to lean more in this instrumental direction.<sup>245</sup> Ecumenical discussion and theological reflection have prompted a line of thinking that reunites the historic strands of baptism, confirmation, and admission to Eucharist, and statements about infant baptism increasingly emphasise the completeness of baptism as "the occasion when God's continued claim on the child is made manifest once and for all."<sup>246</sup> The Presbyterian Church in the USA resolved in 1971 an apparent anomaly in its baptismal polity: the distinction between the 'non-communicant' and 'communicant' baptised. Constitutional amendments were made in order to admit baptised children to communion, and sister churches in other parts of the world have followed this initiative.<sup>247</sup> Although this rationalises the link between the two sacraments, and emphasises the non-cognitive aspects of faith, it does not address in a realistic way the distinction between the visible church (all the baptised) and those who have come to personal faith.<sup>248</sup> Baptism, and its benefits, are seen as a 'package', and any ceremony which claims to complete it is seen as offensive to God's sovereignty; the 1996 PCANZ Directory for Worship does not even mention the rite of confirmation.<sup>249</sup> Some see this trend in liturgy and polity as a second move away

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid. p 102

<sup>243</sup> Pearson, 1982 p 7

<sup>244</sup> Riggs. P 106, 107. also article on baptism liturgy at St Johns Presbyterian in Papatoetoe in Auckland, in Handzon volume 2, 2004.

<sup>245</sup> Some perceive this movement as the product of an internal Anglican debate. Eg Fiddes. P

<sup>246</sup> Willis. P 32

<sup>247</sup> Ibid. p 33. See PCANZ Directory for Worship. Jewett commends this initiative as consistent for paedobaptists but criticises it for fudging the distinction between the confessing church and the world. Jewett. P 242

<sup>248</sup> After stating firmly there is only one kind of membership in the church, the PCUSA added to the confusion by describing the conditions for admission to governing (decision-making) membership in the church Willis. p34

<sup>249</sup> It does however state "Human faithfulness to God needs repeated renewal. Baptism calls for decision at every subsequent stage of life's way, both for those whose Baptism attends their profession of faith and for those who are nurtured from childhood within the family of faith."2.3.5.ii

from the Biblical 'gathered-church' ecclesiology to an inclusive model which is increasingly meaningless in today's post-Christendom world.<sup>250</sup>

At the same time others in the Reformed churches lean more toward the symbolic view, and their refinements have emphasised the human response in baptism. The Lutheran New Testament scholar Kittel said water baptism is never said to call forth spiritual changes, but stands for an outward evidence that an inward transformation has been accomplished.<sup>251</sup> Luther too said that "baptism is no more than an outward sign; if a man cannot have it, he is not condemned, so long as he believes."<sup>252</sup> Baptism cannot be necessary to salvation, for this would imprison God's free grace within the walls of the church; God is not tied to the sacraments for communicating his redemptive, forgiving love.<sup>253</sup> According to Protestant theologian Karl Barth, "Christian Baptism is a picture in which man is not the most important figure but is certainly the second most important."<sup>254</sup> A covenant includes two parties, and thought and energy must be given to encouraging a personal response of Christian discipleship. So in infant baptism in many Reformed churches, the service looks forward to the day when the young person is ready, through confirmation of their baptism, to confess their own faith in Jesus Christ and accept the full responsibility of church membership.<sup>255</sup> Sometimes this process is described in terms of the *potential* salvation signified in Infant baptism, where God, the church and the parents work together in hope of seeing the individuals own confession of faith which will make regeneration *actual*.<sup>256</sup>

Liturgical reform in this group has gone in a more 'Baptist' and 'Gathered Church' direction, and some Presbyterian, Wesleyan and Methodist churches are joining the Church of North India, the United Reformed Church in the UK, and the Church of the Nazarene in the United States in offering two alternative streams of initiation (infant blessing/dedication, conversion to faith, baptism, OR infant baptism, conversion to faith, confirmation of baptism) within the same

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<sup>250</sup> Tovey. P 40 See also William Strange, "Entering the Sheepfold: A New Look at Infant Baptism," in *Joining and Leaving Religion; Research Perspectives*, ed. I Francis, and Katz, Y (Leominster: Gracewing, 2000)

<sup>251</sup> Kittel, 1914, quoted in Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow*. p16

<sup>252</sup> quoted in Barth. p 24, although some Lutherans today include infants in the sacrament because they are not willing to "withhold the grace of God" from infants. See L Vischer, *Ye Are Baptised* (Geneva: WCC, 1961). Page 23f?

<sup>253</sup> From Section 7, Statement on Baptism, UPCUSA 1972. quoted in Willis.P42 See also Daniel Migliore, "Reforming the Theology and Practice of Baptism: The Challenge of Karl Barth," in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks Topics Traditions*, ed. David Willis, and Welker, Michael (Grand Rapids: Wm B Eerdmans, 1999). P 506

<sup>254</sup> Barth. P 9, 14

<sup>255</sup> The Howick Presbyterian vow asks parents to "teach this child the truths and duties of the Christian faith, and encourage them one day to make their own commitment to Jesus as Lord."

<sup>256</sup> Ian Ramage, *Christian Beginnings and Church Initiation* (Cheviot: Gore Bay Press, 1987). P 47



communion.<sup>257</sup> As in the Catholic reforms, believer's baptism is seen as normative, but its meaning may be expressed by a baptismal expression of God's covenantal grace towards children, followed in time by a service of confirmation or affirmation of baptism. The rite used "after conversion" often uses immersion as a symbol and recalls the meaning of the earlier use of water, but is explicitly stated not to be baptism or rebaptism. In New Zealand, Presbyterian minister Samuel McCay made a significant contribution to this creative liturgical possibility, and began offering 'baptismal renewal' with a heartily Reformed rationale:

**God's grace is always available. Christ is always there knocking at the door. He waits for us to give him entry and allow him to cleanse, make new, go on transforming us. Our baptism is a oncer...our baptism is also ongoing, irrespective of the age and stage and the means by which we have come into God's covenant, each and all need to be responding and growing up into Christ...this truth and the experience of this renewal by God's spirit provided the ground from which grew the service of renewal, appropriating baptism by immersion.**<sup>258</sup>

The Reformed conviction of God's prevenient grace has motivated some Presbyterians to offer a range of baby blessing and dedication rites in response to pastoral requests; these may or may not be part of Sunday worship.<sup>259</sup> At different times and in different ways Reformed churches have highlighted both divine grace and human response, avoiding what is regarded as inappropriate sacramentalism on the one hand, and Pelagian individualism on the other.<sup>260</sup>

A summary of Reformed teaching is presented in Figure 3: Reformed Views on Theology of Infant Initiation. The community dimension of faith is important in the observance of the sacraments for Reformed Christians, and one of the Presbyterian responses to the Lima document Baptism Eucharist and Ministry underlines this: "*Through baptism of infants the church promises to lead its children in faith until they know the Lord*"<sup>261</sup> A contemporary

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<sup>257</sup>Roxborough. P 20 also Lederle, in Konig. p 46

<sup>258</sup> Samuel McCay, "Celebrating Renewal and Appropriation of Baptism by Immersion," in *Infant Baptism: The Arguments for and Against*, ed. A Konig, Lederle, H, and Moller, F (Roodepoort: CUM Books, 1984). p129f. Others who have promoted this dual practice of initiation include Congregationalist Robert Paul, and Anglican Bishop Buchanan in England, and Father Francis McNutt in the USA. .

<sup>259</sup> in the case of a non-sacramental rite, the matters of church order that require Presbyterian baptisms to be conducted in the presence of the faith community do not apply; in reality we are simply praying for the child and their family.

<sup>260</sup> Pelagianism rejects the view that humanity is tainted with original sin and instead sees people as having full control, and thus full responsibility, for their own salvation.

<sup>261</sup>Cameroon Presbyterian in Thurian. Vol 1 p 81

resource about Infant Baptism written for New Zealand Protestant churches points out that parents of the baptised have a special responsibility to develop an atmosphere of love and acceptance, forgiveness, listening and caring in the home, as well as providing formal Christian nurture.<sup>262</sup> . In Reformed thinking, regular acknowledgements of God, through worship and education, at home and at church, are seen to build an atmosphere for spiritual growth. The need for such a “nurturing matrix, and the loving patience of caregivers” applies whether the baptised person is adult or infant, for the promise of God expressed in their baptism cannot be completed in a moment in time, but must be recalled and appropriated throughout life.<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>262</sup> K Pearson, *Baptism and Our Children* (Melbourne: Uniting Church Press, 1982). Pearson, 1982, p 10, 11

<sup>263</sup> Migliore. P 508

**FIGURE FOUR: Reformed Views on Theology of Infant Initiation**

Practice	Invocation, use of water, threefold name, declaration of gospel, testimony, parental vows, laying on hands and prayer over child, sometimes anointing - termed Baptism though "dry" Dedication also practised
What God does	Takes initiative, distributes grace freely through faith community and by other means, promises forgiveness and eternal life to those who believe, committed irrevocably to child through grace of covenant home
What the church does	Eldership oversees administration and timing of sacraments, extends boundaries of covenant to those raised by professing parents, offers ongoing and age-appropriate catechesis and pastoral care to parents and child, grants Eucharistic rights, sometimes faith of community seen to validate baptism
What the parents do	Give thanks for gift of child, ask for baptism, must make public commitment to task of Christian parenthood and promise to attend worship and form the child in the faith into which they are baptised, pass values and morals on to child, look forward to conversion and profession of faith
What the child does	"Passive" recipient but from creation has image and awareness of God, may remember rite depending on age
Sin	Child is born into corrupted creation, a history of original sin, with inner tendencies which will inevitably show a propensity for selfishness, meaning of sinfulness may broaden out to include socialised negative patterns
Faith	Faith is important, but parents can make faith promises proleptically, infant baptism intended for parents who are followers of Jesus, child expected to come to own faith through effectual calling
Salvation	Salvation is a gift of God linked with faith, it is effected by the Cross and declared in baptism, which anticipates the response of faith, an individual receives salvation at effectual calling which is not tied to the moment of baptism
Fate of unbaptised	Covenant children covered by grace of election, rather than rite of baptism, Calvin included all infants, others saw children outside the church as lost but this is unacceptable to many
Profession of personal faith	Confirmation is non-sacramental affirmation of faith, as declared in infant baptism, includes public profession of mature faith, and promises of active church membership, may or may not be linked with participation in Eucharist. Unbaptised adults coming to faith are baptised and received as members in one rite.
Bible passages utilised	<b>Mark 10: 14</b> - let the children come to me, <b>Acts 2: 38</b> - the promise is to you and your children, <b>Matthew 28: 20</b> - go and baptise, <b>Romans 6: 4</b> - baptised into union with Christ, <b>1 Cor 7: 14</b> - your children are holy

## CHAPTER 6: INFANT RITES AND ECUMENICAL CONVERGENCE

Practical Theology is a courageous discipline which attempts to face up to divergences in Christian practice and examine them for shared norms and areas of potential synthesis, as well as recommending possible alternative words and rituals. The question is never, "Is God present in our practices of faith?" for God is always present. The inquiry is better phrased "How can we sharpen our senses, clean out our ears, correct our vision so we can perceive God's presence and heed God's direction more clearly?"<sup>264</sup> A review of the three main traditions' practices in regard to infant initiation has revealed some historical blind spots as well as some useful areas of convergence. Clearly the child in the church is to be valued and nurtured whether baptised or not, and rituals to acknowledge his/her unformed spirituality and trusting faith are continuing to evolve.<sup>265</sup> Many of the changes in attitudes and actions can be traced to the demands of today's diverse spiritual and religious traditions which call for new and relevant expressions of community.

The social changes of the last twenty years have shaped a post-modern community that largely rejects dogma and prefers to experience truth interactively.<sup>266</sup> The image-driven culture of the twenty-first century has influenced churches' ministries with children towards programmes that recognise that young people learn in a myriad of ways, and communicate Biblical themes with more music, physical activities, creative thinking, visual learning, listening, relating and self-reflection.<sup>267</sup> They must compete with television programming that exposes the young to a steady stream of materialistic values and shapes their consciousness into simplistic and hedonistic modes of thinking.<sup>268</sup> The trend to religious pluralism and the overall decline in church participation often mean that religious values and beliefs are no longer reinforced at school or in the home. This has impacted the way churches present the gospel of Jesus Christ, and prompted a critique of our adherence to denominational distinctives such as such as baptismal polity and practice.

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<sup>264</sup> Dean.

<sup>265</sup> The Church welcomes them, as it welcomes the intellectually disabled, into the community of faith that lives in the love of God. Faith and Order. 67

<sup>266</sup> Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims* (Nashville: Broadman and Holdman, 2000). Chapters 1 - 4

<sup>267</sup> See for example the Oasis programme Logosdor, *Oasis* [webpage] (2005, accessed 2 October 2005); available from <http://www.logosdor.com/resources/Oasis.aspx>.

<sup>268</sup> Osmer, "Restructuring Confirmation." p 66

.In today's increasingly fragmented society, it is apparent that adults and children come to faith via many pathways, only one of which is nurture. Many families move repeatedly, diminishing the opportunities for bedding in faith practices at a congregational level. In fact the meaning of family has radically altered and the traditional two-parent nuclear set-up is no longer the norm. At one end of the spectrum is an increasing trend for children to be raised in an environment of non-marital co-habitation, sometimes as a series of temporary relationships, and at the other end is the pattern where children are raised in tightly-knit families with culturally-prescribed sets of beliefs and behaviour. These issues throw up huge challenges for the churches wishing to promote the concept of a Christian upbringing; relationships change, families are mobile, people opt out, Sundays are busy, and many believe without belonging.<sup>269</sup> In this context traditional thinking about infant initiation has faced enormous challenges as Christians strive not to be "religious museums, answering questions which people no longer ask, in the metaphysical categories of the fourth century."<sup>270</sup>

Important developments in thinking about children's spirituality have come through researchers like Hay and Nye, Westerhoff and Fowler, who have highlighted the non-cognitive aspects of a child's growth in faith. In this context the historic rituals of infant blessing and baptism have come to have new significance. Fifty years ago Donald Baillie, a Scots Presbyterian had foreshadowed Fowler's work when he wrote of God's grace connecting with the spirituality of the child in baptism:

**The faith and love of the parents and the church, directed through physical channels and using the effective symbolism of baptism, brings the grace of God to the scarcely conscious child - half-conscious trustfulness is the beginning of faith.**<sup>271</sup>

Twenty-first century commentators pick up the Creation theme. In 2004 Glenn Cupit, lecturer in Child Development and member of a Reformed Church, described the young as having a "God-endowed capacity to share relationships with other spiritual beings," and James Fowler himself wrote about "relational nurture" that receives the child as God's beloved creation, worthy of our love, care, and support. This, he said, involves making space for children, attending to their developmental capacities and introducing them to "practices that provide experiences of God's

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<sup>269</sup> Kevin Ward, "Believing without Belonging: Church in the Aftermath of the 60s," *Reality* 43, no. February/March 2001 (2001). Page 20

<sup>270</sup> Kinnamon, 1985, p53

<sup>271</sup> Baillie, 1957, p87.

love".<sup>272</sup> A more recent Catholic source expressed the conviction even more strongly: "Creation is the double gift of existence and a call to participate in the very life of God; the child's natural virtues are a gift entrusted to parents and educators who are to cultivate them with care and respect."<sup>273</sup>

The implications of the theology of Original Sin in children is an important facet of the Practical Theologian's "Why?" question in relation to Infant Initiation, and the 2003 Scripture Union paper *Theology of Childhood* confronted this ancient issue with integrity. It offered an inclusive explanation whereby all humanity is seen as fallen, whether by a twist in our human nature or a nature impregnated with sin and expressed in attitude and action.<sup>274</sup> Few theologians would now hold that the 'total depravity' described in earlier centuries means absolute corruption, and the report points more to a Creation model and the human worth and value of children for a theological anthropology.<sup>275</sup> The authors suggest that insights from the social sciences, such as Mead's concept of internalisation, can give a broader context to our understanding of original sin and explain how a child's everyday experiences of negativity can spoil their demonstrably real inherent spirituality.<sup>276</sup> Sinfulness can also be described in terms of the "spiritual solidarity" of every home that supports or impairs the child's potential for faith, and their family context may include voices "that drown out or obscure the voice of God."<sup>277</sup> A genuine enquiry into the character of God, especially as revealed in Jesus Christ, raises real doubts for the authors about ancient notions of God's consignment of unchurched infants to hell.<sup>278</sup> New Zealand Catholic educators responding to the document described how "original, personal and social sin" is taught in parochial schools today, and referred to a re-examination of the doctrine of Original Sin in contemporary Catholic Christianity.<sup>279</sup> An Australian educationalist noted that

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<sup>272</sup> Fowler, "Faith Development at 30: Naming the Challenges of Faith in a New Millennium." p 412

<sup>273</sup> Michelle Guettler Castellan, *The Educational Philosophy of Maria Montessori in Light of the Theological Anthropology of Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (Montessori Catholic Council, 2005, accessed 2005); available from [www.transporter.co./mcc/essay05](http://www.transporter.co./mcc/essay05).

<sup>274</sup> W Anderson, Cohen, D, Morpew, P, Scott, L, and Strachan, W, "Theology of Childhood: A Theological Resource Framed to Guide the Practice of Evangelising and Nurturing Children: A Summary," *Journal of Christian Education* 47, no. 1 (2004). P 10

<sup>275</sup> See also John McKenna, "Infant Baptism: Theological Reflections," *Worship* 70, no. 3 (1996).

<sup>276</sup> Anderson, "Resource Paper of Scripture Union International." P 14f. A Wesleyan contributor noted the parallel between Wesley's description of original sin as a disease that damages the child's early open responsiveness to the grace of God, and agreed that 'internalisation' helps explain how children learn sinful ways from those around them. See Stonehouse.

<sup>277</sup> Stonehouse. P 41 and Glenn Cupit, "Reflections Stimulated by the Scripture Union *Theology of Childhood* Resource Paper," *Journal of Christian Education* 47, no. 1 (2004). P 58

<sup>278</sup> References to Blocher in Anderson, "Resource Paper of Scripture Union International." 18

<sup>279</sup> Anne Kennedy, and Finlay, Gary, "The Scripture Union Theology of Childhood Resource Paper: A Roman Catholic Response," *Journal of Christian Education* 47, no. 1 (2004).referring to Alison 1998; and Ormerod 1992.

soteriology is really an inappropriate primary focus in relation to ministry with children, and that notions of Jesus as Leader, Brother and Friend are far more constructive.<sup>280</sup>

Thus it can be seen that changes in thinking about children and God are occurring right across the churches, as the nascent spirituality of the child is appreciated and the differing traditions are prompted to "scrutinize their own ecclesiological orthodoxy and orthopraxis".<sup>281</sup> Many Catholic parishes are deferring infant baptism if a realistic hope of a Christian upbringing is absent, and some streams of credobaptist tradition are baptising the children of Christian families younger and younger.<sup>282</sup> A Mennonite theologian visiting New Zealand In 2004 presented a paper on the Theology of the Child, where he referred to the practical theology of his Anabaptist tradition as characterised by a profound cognitive dissonance.<sup>283</sup> The evangelical theology of the child paradoxically upholds, he said, the innate value of a child as loved by God, and capable of a deep human spirituality, alongside a conviction of their profound lostness and need of redemption.<sup>284</sup> His paper took the view that, far from being little pagans, children have an innate spirituality, analogous with the awareness of the divine found in unevangelised peoples around the world.<sup>285</sup> Theologians agree that the Missio Dei is the proper context for consideration of questions of baptism and church; the motive for the rite surely begins in the heart of God.<sup>286</sup> So it is a given that baptism is both an act of God and a human act, that it is a powerful sign and even an effective means of grace. The tensions come in the question of faith and baptism. credobaptists stress a personal response of faith whilst supporters of Infant Baptism accept a response of faith not only from the baptised but also from the community of faith.<sup>287</sup>

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<sup>280</sup>Cupit. P 51 See also Elaine Ramshaw, "How Does the Church Baptise Infants and Small Children?," in *What Is Changing in Baptismal Practice?*, ed. Donald Johnson et al (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1995).

<sup>281</sup> BAPTIST WORLD ALLIANCE, "A Survey of Baptist World Alliance Conversations with Other Churches and Some Implications for Baptist Identity.," in *Joint meeting of Baptist Heritage and Identity Commission and the Doctrine and Interchurch Cooperation Commission*, ed. Ken Manley (Seville: 2002).

<sup>282</sup> See Kalmar, (accessed). and also interesting thread of testimonies from credobaptists baptised as young as 6 years in *Baptism for Children*, (Sharper Iron Forums, March 2005, accessed 12 October 2005); available from <http://www.sharperiron.org/archive/index.php/t-275.html>.

<sup>283</sup> Jim Pankratz, *The Theology of the Child in Anabaptist Tradition* (Auckland: Bible College of New Zealand, March 2004).

<sup>284</sup> Buckland describes this paradox as that between Puritanism and Romanticism. Buckland. Page 35

<sup>285</sup> Pankratz. Op cit. The theme is taken up in Stanley J. Samartha's article "The Holy Spirit and People of Other Faiths" cited in Sebastian, (accessed 2005). And in Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, Revised ed. (Ventura: Regal Books, 1984).

<sup>286</sup> Fiddes.p 295

<sup>287</sup> Anthony R Cross, "Baptists and Baptism - a British Perspective," *Baptist History and Heritage* Winter (2000). Accessed at [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0NXG/is\\_1\\_35/ai\\_94160873](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0NXG/is_1_35/ai_94160873)

These matters have often been a focus of ecumenical debates, which over the last thirty years have seen a great deal of considered dialogue take place, with respectful attempts at critique and response. The convergence document produced by the Faith and Order Commission at Lima helpfully suggested "Baptism is both God's gift and our human response to that gift, bringing together the two poles of the historic baptismal spectrum."<sup>288</sup> All the official responses of churches to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* affirmed God's initiative in the gift of salvation, and agreed that baptism expresses that activity in profound and symbolic ways.<sup>289</sup> Each acknowledged the place of this rite, which has such a long history and precious significance, in proclaiming the one Lord and one faith of the church universal. Ecumenical dialogues at Louisville, Unisa, Faverges, Kuala Lumpur and Crete attempted to go further and show that infant baptism and believer's baptism are not theologically opposed but might coexist as pointing to different aspects of the fullness of truth.<sup>290</sup> "We came to recognise our common mission and our common context in an increasingly mobile and secular society," said an official of the Faith and Order Commission, "and discovered that our practices are not always as different as our classical theologies would imply."<sup>291</sup> The battle lines have definitely shifted. 'Baptist' churches no longer reproach the traditional churches for their 'hordes of lukewarm baptised', and paedobaptists have moved on from charging their colleagues with consigning their offspring to the devil.<sup>292</sup> The rich significance of baptism has continued to unfold as a result of the ecumenical dialogues, formal and informal, of the last thirty years.

It is true that the statement compiled at Lima as a culmination of decades of debate seemed to lean towards an instrumental interpretation, stating boldly "**baptism is a gift of God....the sign of new life through Jesus Christ. It unites the one baptised with Christ and his people.**"<sup>293</sup> Some credobaptists felt this paradigm left little room for the individual's freedom, choice, and growth. "The insistence that everything associated with Believer's Baptism be squeezed into baptism of an unaware infant is a heavy load to bear", said one response to *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, while another felt Lima portrays (infant) baptism as "a churchly rite which is everything, gives everything and accomplishes everything."<sup>294</sup> These communities asked for

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<sup>288</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 1982, B8

<sup>289</sup> Kinnamon. P22 see also Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry 1982 - 1990* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1990).

<sup>290</sup> Anglican Church of Ireland, Thurian.1986,

<sup>291</sup> Cranford, in Lorenzen. p6

<sup>292</sup> Kinnamon. p24

<sup>293</sup> *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, 1982, B1 and 2

<sup>294</sup> Baptist Union of Scotland in Thurian. vol 3, p234 and Union of Evangelical Free Churches in Germany.in Thurian.vol 2 p194



more cautious language, and preferred wording where God is the subject, and baptism is the context, through which the theological reality is effected.<sup>295</sup> The Baptist Union of Great Britain also had reservations about the instrumental language which they declared was “at best hyperbole and at worst objectionable.”<sup>296</sup> The Believer's Baptism churches emphasise the Response aspect of God's gift of baptism, and take the view that the rite is incomplete without an appropriate faith and responsibility being evidenced in the life of the baptised.<sup>297</sup> In the New Testament Baptism ‘into Christ’ was shorthand for conversion, wrote one Baptist, while another described the work of Christ as “objectively sufficient but not subjectively efficient; it must be personally appropriated and applied.”<sup>298</sup>

This emphasis on faith and response does not however mean that credobaptists do not understand the primacy of God's grace in salvation.. and the inclusive reality of God's covenant.<sup>299</sup> The response of the Disciples (Church of Christ) to Lima noted that "faith is neither a momentary act nor totally individualistic, but an expression of the faith lived in a believing community."<sup>300</sup> “Baptists” in general have recognised that their somewhat individualistic baptismal practices have not always taken due cognisance of the corporateness implicit in the ordinance, or embraced an adequate understanding of covenant.<sup>301</sup> In the absence of a suitable rite to acknowledge the saving role of family, a new one had been developed, infant dedication, which is practised widely though not universally. Despite Baptist scholar Keith Clements' comment that Baptists have yet to arrive at an agreed theology of children in the church, in practice Baptists have treated their children as Covenant children, not fully responsible, but capable of “loving Jesus, being sorry for doing wrong, and wishing to serve God.”<sup>302</sup> Ecumenically-minded Baptist Beasley-Murray proposes that the children of Christian parents are catechumens, under pastoral care, in a uniquely close relation to the fellowship of faith, without being fully members of it.<sup>303</sup> A “Baptist” child is taught the Bible, and participates in the worship life of the church, to the point of regularly receiving communion; sociologically, said

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<sup>295</sup> Church of North India Thurian. vol 2 p71

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., p74

<sup>297</sup> The statement compiled at Lima did acknowledge the importance of faith; “*The necessity of faith for the reception of the salvation embodied and set forth in baptism is acknowledged by all churches. Personal commitment is necessary for responsible membership in the body of Christ.*” Commission on Faith and Order, *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper 111* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982). B 8

<sup>298</sup> New Zealander Gilmour.p89, and Briton Pawson. p12

<sup>299</sup> Lorenzen. p23

<sup>300</sup> See Thurian.

<sup>301</sup> West, in Louisville, 1980, p15

<sup>302</sup> Clements., and M Jeschke, *Believer's Baptism for Children of the Church*, (Pennsylvania: Herald, 1983). p 111

<sup>303</sup> G R Beasley-Murray, "The Authority and Justification for Believers' Baptism," *Review and Expositor* LXXVII, no. 1 (1980).p68

West at Louisville, the only difference from “sacramental” churches is when the ceremony of baptism takes place.<sup>304</sup>

In the decades following Louisville and Lima, some credobaptists seemed to disengage from the debate, and retreat into subjectivism, and obstinate “rebaptism” (though for them baptism, on profession of faith, of one who has received baptism only as an infant, is regarded as valid and not repetition)<sup>305</sup>, By 2000 British Baptists had become “a schizophrenic denomination” in which only those involved with ecumenical partnerships showed any interested in the theology and practice of baptism.<sup>306</sup> Limited interdenominational dialogue has meant other streams may not realise how much of a stumbling block the issue of unrepeatability is for Believer's Baptists, and that it is difficult for them to appreciate the depth of offence which their practices have caused other Christians.<sup>307</sup> On the other hand it could also be said that Paedobaptists have not always respected the “sacramental integrity” of the Baptist view, and Reformed and Catholic churches still require repetition of the rite if it was not performed by a minister they regard as properly ordained.<sup>308</sup> Roxborough notes that the word baptism 'by itself' does not carry a sense of being something that cannot or should not be repeated; it is only in connection with Christian initiation that it has come to have this sense. He suggests making a distinction between duplication of either infant baptism or believer's baptism, and the quite different issue of believer's baptism following infant baptism.<sup>309</sup>

Different understandings of baptism are internalised as part of a tradition's identity, which have been shaped in reaction to the teachings of other churches, and there may be a degree of blinkeredness involved.<sup>310</sup> Most credobaptists prefer the concept of ordinance over the word sacrament, decrying the notion that God should attach his gift of grace to any physical object or action, yet the New Testament language about baptism does imply something more than plain

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<sup>304</sup> West.p16

<sup>305</sup> Lorenzen. p 28. for Baptists dropping out see Stanley E Porter, and Cross, Anthony R, ed., *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Series 234 (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). P 5

<sup>306</sup> Cross. 2000 cited in WORLD ALLIANCE. op cit.

<sup>307</sup> Holmes notes it was also a live issue in the early church, where heretics and schismatics had conducted baptisms. Stephen Holmes, "Baptism: Patristic Resources for Ecumenical Dialogue," in *Dimensions of Baptism: Biblical and Theological Studies*, ed. Stanley E Porter, and Cross, Anthony R. (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002). P 262ff

<sup>308</sup> Beasley-Murray, "Papers from Wcc Louisville Consultation on Baptism 1979; Faith and Order Paper 97." p 70.

<sup>309</sup> Roxborough. p17f Most credobaptists would not rebaptise someone properly baptised as a believer, though repetition does occur especially when the believers' baptism was in childhood.

<sup>310</sup> Sebastian, (accessed 2005)

prayer.<sup>311</sup> The passive voice of statements like “you were washed, you were sanctified,” indicates a real action and not mere symbolism.<sup>312</sup> Lorenzen noted that Swiss Baptists who are supposedly bewildered with the concept of sacrament - how can a physical action incorporate one into Christ? - embrace without difficulty the notion of a substitutionary atonement accomplished by the nailing of Christ to the cross.<sup>313</sup> These things are mysteries, and not simply and mechanistically explained.<sup>314</sup> As Practical Theology’s questions about practice reflecting the gospel have been addressed with integrity the thinking of ecumenically-aware credobaptist churches has moved more towards the centre of the spectrum. They know baptism is not a magical act which automatically bestows grace upon us or mechanically confers eternal life. But neither is it simply an affirmation of faith by human beings, or a visual aid which assists us as we seek to be faithful. Baptism as God’s act is an open act, an inviting act, an enabling act which can effect the reality of faith, and as such may be appropriate at a young age.<sup>315</sup>

At the same time there have been changes in Catholic thinking and practice that have moved the norms of that tradition toward the centre of the spectrum. The doctrine of Original Sin has rightly recognised the flaws in human nature, but the church must also attend to the deep truth that “God loves us from the first moment of our conception”.<sup>316</sup> Dogma continues to hold that baptism is “necessary”, but infant baptism is now delayed or withheld for a variety of reasons.<sup>317</sup> The Mediaeval practices of compulsory baptism are now seen as offensive to individual liberty, and not as withholding divine grace.<sup>318</sup> The Roman Adult Rite of Initiation makes far more of the Response aspects of baptism, and demands a committed journey of catechesis and spiritual formation. Genuine renewal is recognisably taking place in traditional churches, and the role of Christian nurture and faith-sharing have been recognised as necessary complements to the rite of infant baptism. paedobaptists have realised that the subjectivism and sentimentality they

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<sup>311</sup> Joseph Eagen, "The Authority and Justification for Infant Baptism," *Review and Expositor* LXXVII, no. 1 (1980). p48

<sup>312</sup> 1 Cor 6.11 Gilmour. p90. But note too Barth’s comment that “one is not brought to baptism; one comes for baptism”. Barth.p 42

<sup>313</sup> Beasley Murray 1966, quoted in Lorenzen. P 25

<sup>314</sup> Those churches who prefer the term “ordinance” may still be giving the action a sacramental meaning. Sometimes the word refers to a reality which has already been actualized and which is effective by faith in the life of the believer and the congregation. For all these differences, most traditions can agree that the sacraments/ordinances are both expressive and formative of reality. Unpublished document from Faith and Order, "One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition." Section II para B 29.

<sup>315</sup> Stookey. p74

<sup>316</sup> Quoted from Guzie 1981, in Sandra DeGidio, *Catholic Update on the Meaning of Baptism*(Archdiocese of Cincinnati, 1989, accessed 13 June 2005); available from [americancatholic.org/newsletters/CU/ac0389](http://americancatholic.org/newsletters/CU/ac0389).

<sup>317</sup> Doctrine of the Faith. P 113

<sup>318</sup> Zenit.org, (accessed 2005).

have shunned testify to a genuine life in the Spirit they themselves need. Their horrified reaction to anything faintly sniffing of rebaptism is beginning to give way to a more inclusive and generous spirit.<sup>319</sup> The Faith and Order Commission has continued to meet regularly and noted in an overview of the progress of the Lima document that:

**Baptism and Eucharist do not have a role and efficacy in themselves...God's action requires a response of faith, which is in itself a gift nourished by the Spirit. Churches understand and express differently how God's sacramental gift and the believer's faith are related. All agree however that God's gift is directed toward evoking such a response.**<sup>320</sup>

A witness to this convergence is the church historian Burnish who conducted an extensive comparison of catechetical material in Catholic and Baptist contexts, and found many similar themes, treated as would be expected, with different perspectives.<sup>321</sup> The liturgical material he examined also revealed analogies in descriptions of the basic task of the Christian, regardless of the particular tradition's understanding of the connection between baptism and church membership.<sup>322</sup> Ongoing discussion among the churches about the role of catechesis and the place of confirmation beg the ecclesiological question; when does entry into the church occur? Churches that agree with infant baptism and those who stand for believer's baptism may have different answers because they start from different models of church: often for paedobaptists the 'Volkskirche,' a mixed body, and usually for credobaptists, a 'gathered' church of committed believers.<sup>323</sup> However such subtleties fade into obscurity in face of the mission challenges of post-Christendom society. In today's pluralist climate even a renewed zeal for the notion of covenant family cannot eclipse the need for each individual to make a conscious and public faith commitment.

Thus it can be seen that the rich significance of baptism has continued to unfold as a result of the ecumenical dialogues, formal and informal, of the last thirty years. The fact is that the

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<sup>319</sup> See for example the international Dialogue between the Catholic Church and Mennonite World. *Called Together to Be Peacemakers*. Assisi, 2001, the Survey of Baptist World Alliance Conversations with Other Churches, Seville, 2002 and the article by Martin Cressey, "Baptist-Reformed Dialogue," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, ed. N and others Lossky (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002).

<sup>320</sup> Faith and Order, *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry 1982 - 1990.*, p 145

<sup>321</sup> Burnish.p176. a 2005 NZ Baptist service of infant dedication reveals most of the same themes. Steve Taylor, personal communication

<sup>322</sup> Ibid. p186; a more recent report contends this wide diversity of practice among - and sometimes within - the churches as indicating "discrepancies between theology, symbol, and practice." Faith and Order, "One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition." Section D 57

<sup>323</sup> WORLD ALLIANCE. Section A1

baptism statements in *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry* covered both theology and application.<sup>324</sup> Most official responses to the document were happy with the first: the interplay of Grace and Response, the participation in Christ, the community dimension, the need for ethical out-working.<sup>325</sup> But questions were raised by the second half, especially as theological commonality metamorphosed into “mutual recognition” of practice. Two patterns of initiation - Believer's Baptism and Infant Baptism - were to be recognised as equivalent alternatives for entry into the church; a pattern whereby baptism in infancy is followed by a later profession of faith, and a pattern whereby believer's baptism follows upon a presentation and blessing in infancy.<sup>326</sup> Churches were encouraged to recognise these two total processes as equivalent alternatives, which could be acknowledged through reciprocal relationships.<sup>327</sup> Many of the responses greeted this idea with enthusiasm but still lapsed into an Infant Baptism/Believer's Baptism equivalence, treating the theological “common baptism” as a liturgical “mutually-recognised” baptism, though they are by no means the same thing.<sup>328</sup>

Zernov warned in 1961 that, historically, unity has not been obtained by demanding the unconditional surrender of divergent views to a single uniform authority. In 1979 the participants at a Faith and Order meeting heard a passionate plea for the division over Christian Initiation to end. The fourth question of *Practical Theology* –“What refinements of these practices would mirror God more clearly?” – was answered with two realistic recommendations. Catholics and Reformed must rise above their inadequate understandings of original sin and the grace of baptism itself, and resolutely refuse to baptize infants whose parents give no reasonable promise of Christian nurture; “Baptists” must move on from stubbornly building their entire Christian identity on the New Testament witness and a now obsolete critique of baptismal practices of past centuries.<sup>329</sup>

The dialogue of the last decade has focussed on the question of discernment: which variations in baptismal practice reflect the healthy diversity proper to the body of Christ, and which variations represent a divergence from acceptable practice?<sup>330</sup> *Practical Theology* in our own era now needs to turn to the idea of Paul Hiebert's missiological “centred set”, where the focus

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<sup>324</sup> Fiddes. P 284

<sup>325</sup> Ibid. Page 5

<sup>326</sup> Faith and Order, *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper 111*. Commentary on paragraph 12

<sup>327</sup> Faith and Order, *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry 1982 - 1990*. p 109

<sup>328</sup> Fiddes.P 286

<sup>329</sup> Paraphrase of Eagen.p 61

<sup>330</sup> Faith and Order, "One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition." V B 79

is not on a boundary but on relationship to a central goal.<sup>331</sup> Centred-set communities represent a dynamic and flexible approach, allowing people to journey towards or away from a church without encountering fixed entry or exit points. All baptismal practices moving in that direction of apostolicity can be included in the set.<sup>332</sup>

Unpublished documents from a 2005 convocation suggest three possible centres: the water-rite itself, the journey of initiation, and the life of faith.<sup>333</sup>

A perceptive paper by Paul Fiddes in 2002 identified the second of these – the journey of initiation - as potentially the most fruitful for convergence. The unwary reader of ecumenical documents, he says, may assume that the expression “baptismal process” is the process of initiation, but this is not the case.<sup>334</sup> The term may simply mean baptism plus a process, where discipleship is symbolised by the beginning rite.<sup>335</sup> Fiddes believes the Unified (Package) View as now practised in many western Protestant paedobaptist churches has omitted the crucial Response aspect of personal faith.<sup>336</sup> These churches, influenced by Orthodox tradition and the Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults where Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist are amalgamated, have read this unified rite into *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry*.<sup>337</sup> Their aim to “hold together matters that have been torn apart in the history of baptism” has led to an integrated practice where the whole process of becoming a communicant Christian is compressed in time into a single rite needing no confirmation or completion.<sup>338</sup> This move has in one sweep multiplied the number of potential participants in weekly Eucharist, while taking away the lifelong process of growth linked with personal commitment and responsible membership.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid. 14. See Sheila Pritchard, "Digging Wells or Building Fences: The Risk of Spiritual Growth," *REALITY Magazine*, no. Feb/March 1994 (1994).

<sup>332</sup> The prototype approach devised by Rosch, whereby members of category are compared with typical representatives, is another potentially helpful paradigm. A church that extends baptism to infants could be regarded as non-prototypical, but not as a non-church. See Anthony Freeman, "Sister Churches and Sisters in the Church," *Modern Believing* (accessed 2005).

<sup>333</sup> Faith and Order, "One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition." 14

<sup>334</sup> Fiddes. P 293

<sup>335</sup> This is the view taken in the documents from Faverges. Thomas Best, and Heller, Dagmar, ed., *Becoming a Christian: The Ecumenical Implications of Our Common Baptism*, Faith and Order Paper, vol. 184 (Geneva: WCC, 1999). P 78 - 81

<sup>336</sup> He suggests it derives from an internal Anglican debate and a concern to maintain clergy power. Fiddes. p 287

<sup>337</sup> Faith and Order, *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper 111*. Commentary on B14

<sup>338</sup> Lathrop in Best, ed. P 27, and Fiddes.p 284

<sup>339</sup> Fiddes notes the inconsistency in the English report *On the Way* which describes the “rich sacramental process” for adult catechumens, yet for enquirers baptised as children going through exactly the same formation, process language is avoided and their experience presented as simply grasping or appropriating a past event. Fiddes.P 291

The move to a Unified Rite, says Fiddes, may have drawn the liturgical and Reformed churches together, but has left no room for "Baptist" theologians open to the possibilities inherent in recognising Infant Baptism's place in a Process View of Initiation.<sup>340</sup> He calls for a more inclusive terminology where the process of initiation can have Infant Baptism at the start or Believer's Baptism at the end.<sup>341</sup> A report called Churches Together in the UK described the total process of initiation:<sup>342</sup>

Infant Baptism within a believing community > Christian nurture >  
personal faith and communion

OR

Christian nurture > personal faith >  
Believer's Baptism, membership and communion

This was in fact the message of the Lima statement even if the catchphrase Common Baptism was used, because in that document it was expected that infant baptism would be affirmed later by personal faith and commitment.<sup>343</sup> Lederle in 1983 had offered this synthesis:

**Christian initiation in a congregational context involves at least two focal points - a covenantal expression towards infants and a personal confession of faith by young believers. The traditional churches have done this with baptism of infants and a later service of confirmation without water. Baptists have historically done it the other way round - offered a 'dry baptism' and a 'wet confirmation'**<sup>344</sup>

Many in the evangelical wings of traditional churches perceive that what is seen to be happening in infant baptism and what is done in believer's baptism are different and, in fact, complementary. The one completes the intention of the other. The recovery of the unified rite may be theologically satisfying but it is farcical in practice, for no infant can be said to be a mature and responsible member of the Christian community.<sup>345</sup> Before and after Lima, various experimental practices have endeavoured to express the convergence envisaged in the two 'equivalent alternatives' of Christian initiation described in the commentary in the Lima material.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid. p 287. For a Catholic perspective see DeGidio, (accessed 2005).

<sup>341</sup> (which of course is just the end of the beginning, cf CS Lewis)

<sup>342</sup> See Thurian. Vol 1. p 71

<sup>343</sup> Faith and Order, *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper 111*. para 15.6

<sup>344</sup> Lederle in Konig, p142

<sup>345</sup> Roxborough., p18

<sup>346</sup> These include the validation of other forms of Christian initiation by Believer's Baptism churches, or even the permission of two alternative streams of initiation within the same communion.<sup>347</sup> This is the practice of the Church of North India, the United Reformed Church in the United Kingdom, the Church of the Nazarene, and some South African churches.<sup>348</sup> The Exclusive Brethren too combine the regular practice of both infant baptism and believer's baptism within an evangelistic framework, with room for freedom of conscience.<sup>349</sup> In New Zealand evangelical co-operating and mainstream parishes a respectful 'Smorgasbord' of baptismal options has become the norm.<sup>350</sup>

Reflection on norms and practices has brought about a major breakthrough in convergence through services of confirmation or affirmation of baptism which use immersion as a symbol of what is going on, but which are explicitly stated not to be baptism or rebaptism. During the charismatic renewal Anglican Bishop Buchanan in England, Reformed minister Samuel McCay in New Zealand and Catholic priest Father Francis McNutt in the United States had to find a creative liturgical response to pastoral requests for rebaptism. "This solution [immersion as an affirmation of baptism] was forged by my own charismatic experience in an apparently impossible moral dilemma" said McNutt, "it combines a belief in the validity of infant baptism with recognition of the values proposed by adherents of believer's baptism."<sup>351</sup> At that time, Lederle described these initiatives as permitting two 'wet' ceremonies where both camps have traditionally had one wet and one dry one.<sup>352</sup>

My own theology and practice as a New Zealand Presbyterian is to carefully distinguish confirmation by immersion from believers baptism; the polity of the Presbyterian church is very clear about rebaptism and even if the candidates do not perceive their infant rite and childhood upbringing as significant for their own faith formation, the church does, and so due respect is

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<sup>346</sup> Faith and Order, *Baptism Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper 111.*, B12

<sup>347</sup> Baptist pastor Hazel Sherman reports that in her rural congregation the children have not witnessed a 'normal' believers baptism because the community welcomes those who have been previously baptised. See p 118 in Porter, ed.

<sup>348</sup> Roxborough.p20, also Lederle op cit and Roy.chapter 8.

<sup>349</sup> Bridge. p147

<sup>350</sup> At Howick Presbyterian we offer infant baptism by sprinkling, infant dedication, baby blessing at home or church, believers baptism by immersion or sprinkling, confirmation of baptism by laying on of hands or immersion, and even affirmation (by immersion) of confirmation of baptism!

<sup>351</sup> Francis McNutt, "A Proposed Practical Solution to the Controversy between Proponents of Believers Baptism and Infant Baptism," in *Infant Baptism: The Arguments for and Against*, ed. A Konig, Lederle, H, and Moller, F (Roodepoort: CUM Books, 1984). p162

<sup>352</sup> Lederle in Konig. p 142



paid in the liturgy and in the rite itself to the gracious initiative of God, recognised by the parents in bringing their children for baptism long before.

*A..., J..., and T..., Jesus Christ has chosen you and called you, together with us, into the church which is his body. Each of you were sealed for Jesus Christ when your family brought you into the faith community by baptism as a tiny baby (at Star of the Sea, at All Saints, at the Dutch Reformed Church in Pretoria) But now you have you have come to a personal understanding and experience of God's love, and of the faith we proclaim together. In response to Christ's invitation to confess him before others, you have come to receive immersion as an affirmation of your baptism into Christ and his family. Through the beautiful symbol of entrusting yourself to the waters of the mighty ocean, you come to be reminded of God's gracious love and to be empowered for living out the Christian life in a new and more intentional way.*<sup>353</sup>

Notwithstanding this careful explanation, there is a persistent tendency for the candidate to refer to the service as their baptism, and when reminded that it is baptism with a lower case b (for it indeed a drenching, an overwhelming with water) rather than with an upper case B (which was their infant experience), their eyes glaze over as if to say, "So?" And from a pastoral point of view, I have to concur – does God really care? The church cares, and this is a matter of order, of fidelity to my ordination vows, and an ecumenical consideration, but to our sovereign God, it is surely more a matter of "rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who has repented".<sup>354</sup>

Fiddes proposes that only a theology of journey – "the journey of sacramental initiation" - can facilitate the kind of convergence in polity envisaged by Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry<sup>355</sup> One of the more recent Faith and Order papers on baptism declared:

**Through our common baptism we are all brought into Christ, and this forms the basis of our ecumenical engagement with each other: because Christ has claimed us, we have no right to reject one another ... Since we as Christians are all incorporated into the crucified and glorified Christ, nothing--not even the churches with their centuries of division--can separate us from one another.**<sup>356</sup>

Such a moving plea suggests any critique of this wonderful commonality is "wilfully destructive" but even seasoned "ecumaniacs" will agree that acknowledging an already-existing parity or

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<sup>353</sup> Confirmation service Eastern Beach Auckland March 2005.

<sup>354</sup> Luke 15: 7, 10

<sup>355</sup> Fiddes. p 294

<sup>356</sup> Best, ed.P 3

koinonia between rites is not the same as granting the other's rite equal status within one's own tradition.<sup>357</sup> Differences that remain *among* and *within* churches of each stream need to be acknowledged alongside differences in the understanding and practice of baptism *between* the baptismal traditions.<sup>358</sup>

Nevertheless, there appears to be a growing willingness for churches to recognise the validity of forms of Christian Initiation practised in other traditions. An interim report of the World Council of Churches meeting in Greece in 2005 seems to have picked up Fiddes' focus on initiation:

**Initiation, centered and complete in the water-rite, leads to a life-long process of formation and responsible discipleship...baptism is part of the larger process of an individual's growth into the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The churches differ in their understanding, not so much of the goal of this process as of its constituent parts and when, within the individual's lifetime, they should occur.**<sup>359</sup>

Initiation into the life of Christ and his church is thus a larger Process than the moment of baptism of an infant or a believer.<sup>360</sup> The historic mistake has been to overlook this reality in favour of the Package view which acknowledged the powerful completeness of the meaning of baptism. Package, Process, cant it be both? After all, marriage is both a package and a process. So is giving birth. In one sense nothing needs to be done to complete it – but if no process follows it is a travesty and may even be annulled as a consequence. That is true of baptism at whatever age is received.

In today's post-Christendom world it is salutary for Christians to see that proponents of believers' baptism are not wrong, nor are the proponents of baptism of infants misguided. Radical changes in Catholic thinking and practice have acknowledged this, and a contemporary liturgy for Infant Dedication in New Zealand Baptist church includes many features of a Reformed Infant Baptism service.<sup>361</sup> Collapsing time might foreshadow a future church where a

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<sup>357</sup> Faith and Order, "One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition." I B 11. Members of churches which recognize one another's baptisms may still not partake together of the Eucharist. This bizarre situation arises through lack of mutual recognition not of baptism, but of ministries.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid. V A 76

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.58

<sup>360</sup> Ernest Payne, "Baptists and Christian Initiation," *Baptist Quarterly* XXVI, no. 4 (1975). P 157

<sup>361</sup> Declaration of the grace of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ, ritual anointing, threefold name, Aaronic blessing parental promises and undertaking by faith community to support family. Steve Taylor, personal communication, 2005

coming together of the Catholic trend to delay baptism, and the Baptist trend to move it forward, come together in a new pattern of voluntary baptism at about age seven.

The move towards a unified rite in Paedobaptist churches has, in my opinion, been counterproductive. In a missional milieu there is a desperate need for a clear public rite of passage to mark the mature appropriation of the Christian faith.<sup>362</sup> Believers Baptism, traditional confirmation and confirmation of baptism by immersion can all fulfil this need. But today's families are also searching for infant rites that will acknowledge the sense of the sacred that accompanies a birth, and the unformed but very real spirituality of the child, and allow them to embrace the responsibility of parenthood, and to formally request the support of family, friends, and even church, in this awesome task. Infant baptism, dedication, or baby blessing are possible responses to this yearning. Infant Baptism and its variations need to become contextual, and an opportunity for pastoral ministry rather than a barrier. The focus needs to shift, so that instead of groups defending cherished values by attacking the other, all Christians learn to acknowledge the rich significance and ethical implications of baptism.

The emerging church must embrace new opportunities for ritual, and rediscover the performative force of the word.<sup>363</sup> As Westerhoff noted thirty years ago, access to reality, to others, to God is mediated by signs; ritualisation is crucial for establishing boundaries, for developing social institutions and for providing the young with adaptive mechanisms.<sup>364</sup> Despite post-modern pluralism, people are attracted to church rituals, and even if their theology is inadequate, these relationships provide an opportunity for the church herself to be the authentic sacrament.<sup>365</sup> As we offer new kind of celebrations, mark moments of transition, and recognise the real spiritual receptivity of the child, ecclesial ceremonies and expectations need to give way to genuine celebration of the transcendent. Recent initiatives in New Zealand to provide a Community Celebrancy service enable people to "pay attention to these events in their life, noticing what's going on, engaging and reflecting on it."<sup>366</sup> This may seem individualistic, but like today's non-attending couples marrying in church, these post-denominational pilgrims are asking to stand in a tradition that gives their family meaning and provides social and emotional

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<sup>362</sup> This is what the reformers called effectual calling

<sup>363</sup> James McClendon, "Baptism as a Performative Sign," *Theology Today* 23, no. 3 (1966).

<sup>364</sup> Josef Lamberts, "Contemporary Feeling and Liturgy," *Concilium International Journal for Theology* 3 (1995). P 122

<sup>365</sup> Ibid. For attraction of church rituals see AC Nielsen, *Attracting New Zealanders to Spiritual Life* (Auckland: Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2002).

<sup>366</sup> Nicky Jenkins, "Celebrating Community Ceremonies," *Candour* 2005.

support. Baby Blessings today are often an “explicitly religious ceremony where men and women deliberately present themselves to the God of life to express their thanks and ask for a blessing.”<sup>367</sup> In some ways this is quite different from baptism, and yet perhaps it is what parents were asking for all along.

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<sup>367</sup>Lamberts.

## CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Good theology can pave the way to better ministry practice, because the sacraments, being pastoral, are subject to continual change.<sup>368</sup> Historically the rite of baptism, using water to signify new life through Jesus Christ, was regarded as the basis of Christian life and membership of the one church of Jesus Christ. Today it presents many faces, adopts many shapes, yields many meanings.<sup>369</sup> Different understandings and practices of baptism have developed in various contexts, and led to such a multiplicity that Christians have sometimes been unable to recognise one another's baptisms as the one baptism in Christ. This is clearly seen in the area of infant initiation into the church of Jesus Christ, where some traditions regard children as proper candidates for baptism, while others very firmly do not, though all hold their practice to be grounded in Scripture. In former generations it was common for those adopting different polities to be ignorant of the theological concerns of the other, and to judge one another only by abuses. However in a post-Christendom era it is more appropriate to recognise the validity of each other's position as different aspects of the truth, and to celebrate the common treasures of creation : the spirituality of the child, and of the stages of faith.

Observation of the norms and rites for including infants in the faith community in three generic traditions has produced a useful historical comparison and identification of contemporary areas of convergence. A Practical Theology methodology was applied to facilitate reflection on how, and why, practices can reflect the profound messages of divine grace and human response. Optimism regarding a more respectful expression of koinonia and possible areas of reciprocity was kindled by asking of each tradition "what refinements of infant initiation would mirror the gospel of Jesus Christ more clearly?" The popular piety that saw baptism as a form of heavenly "fire insurance", to protect the child from eternal torment is now seen as an inadequate reflection of both the character of God and the status of the child.<sup>370</sup> The view of some Catholics that infant baptism is "licit but abnormal" is gaining wider acceptance, as churches explore appropriate ways to celebrate allegiance to Christ and mature commitment to his church.<sup>371</sup> The Protestant liturgical reforms encouraging a unified rite have been less helpful in a post-Christendom culture, though perhaps it is the mobility and pluralism of today that make a

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<sup>368</sup> McKenna. P 210

<sup>369</sup> Crawford. P 37

<sup>370</sup> God is the designer and architect of human development and functioning, and we may suppose that his merciful judgment will not contradict his merciful design Anderson, "Resource Paper of Scripture Union International." p 22

<sup>371</sup> cf Barth's view that infant baptism is "true but not correct", Barth. P 41

'package' appealing.<sup>372</sup> The historical emphasis on scarce grace, confined to, and distributed only by, the church, has widened to a holistic perspective of grace in the whole of human existence.<sup>373</sup> The findings of social sciences about noncognitive infant faith have raised interesting possibilities for rituals to celebrate the inherent spirituality in humanity. The view that all children begin with God, but will drift from that position unless an effective evangelistic or nurturing influence operates in their lives, seems to offer fertile ground for more consistent theology and practice.<sup>374</sup>

The protracted search for a synthesis that acknowledges the rich meaning of baptism in all its forms is still going on. Today though it is conducted in a climate of respect and far greater understanding. The issue is not how we can move from diversity into a difference-denying compromise, but how we can find a unity that encompasses more of the richness of our common baptismal heritage.<sup>375</sup> Pastors like me need to go back to the grandmothers who berate us about baptism with a more cohesive rationale than the fire insurance of former days: : Parents and churches are to receive these little ones and teach them with a gospel of "cuddles and softly spoken words" that God loves and welcomes them into his Kingdom.<sup>376</sup> But we are also to introduce them to his Son; instruct them in the life God expects of them, and reassure them that God will go far to pursue them when they abandon or ignore him.<sup>377</sup>

It appears that all churches now agree that baptism begins with the sovereign action of God, reaching out in love, that Jesus Christ lived, died and rose again to express that gracious love, and that Christian baptism is grounded in these historical events of salvation as recorded in Scripture. There is also an emerging consensus that among those whom God calls are some who are too young to articulate faith.<sup>378</sup> Whether parents take the view that their children already belong to the kingdom, or that they are included in God's loving embrace by grace alone, they can play a special role as the congregation accompanies little ones on their journey to personal Christian commitment.<sup>379</sup> Children's workers in Sunday schools or Christian education programmes need to be aware of their great responsibility for building up these infant

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<sup>372</sup> This point was made forty years ago by Robert Middleton, "Believers Baptism and the Sacrament of Confirmation," *Foundations* XI, no. 2 (1968). P 145.

<sup>373</sup> McKenna.p 203

<sup>374</sup> Buckland. p 63

<sup>375</sup> Kinnamon. p18

<sup>376</sup> Bridger, *Children Finding Faith*.p 22

<sup>377</sup> Paraphrase of Cupit. P 56

<sup>378</sup> For some the call would be universal, for others covenantal.

<sup>379</sup> See Faith and Order, "One Baptism: Towards Mutual Recognition." 66

participants in worship and faith as they discover what it is to be a disciple of Christ.<sup>380</sup> Creative thinking is now needed about how we can better express this convergence in understanding of the journey of initiation, and make a more conscious effort to recognise one another's baptismal integrity. Perhaps the historic *koinonia* of 'We believe; I believe', can now be expressed in a post modern 'I believe; we believe.'

A full-bodied interpretation of Scripture and psychology for family life will involve wrestling with the paradoxical complexities of human reality and divine grace.<sup>381</sup> Infant initiation, whatever form it takes, is the Church's way of celebrating and enacting the embrace of God, who loves human beings from the moment of conception.<sup>382</sup> As the church ritualizes the reality of divine grace, and accepts its own responsibility for catechizing the baptised, we may well discover afresh how God's transforming love is imparted to, and experienced by, the child at a profound noncognitive level.<sup>383</sup> It remains though for them to grow into what they are called to be, daughters and sons of God.<sup>384</sup>

The initiation signified in baptism is a process, and different traditions place it at different points of the spiritual journey. Whether the pastoral rite used to celebrate God's grace in the barely-conscious spirit of the child uses water or not, there is a need for a clear public rite to mark the appropriation of personal faith. "*One baptism is enough*", said Sister Margaret Magdalen after experiencing a charismatic renewal, "*and more than enough for any human being if we enter into it fully... We have been given something so profound in baptism that we shall never exhaust its riches.*"<sup>385</sup> Adherents of all three faith traditions agree, and endeavour in their own context to integrate baptismal practice with a robust theology of the child. In a missionary situation once again, the church cannot hold any human traditions as sacrosanct. A Baptist theologian reminds us that God should have the last word.

**All of us in all the churches need to consider afresh our ways before God, with the Bible open before us, a prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and a preparedness to listen to what the Spirit is saying to all the churches. With such a prayer answered....the inadequate insights of frail traditions would**

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<sup>380</sup> See Ibid. 7

<sup>381</sup> Stonehouse. P 37

<sup>382</sup> See Psalm 139

<sup>383</sup> for experienced faith see Westerhoff. p 89

<sup>384</sup> Paraphrased from DeGidio, (accessed 2005).

<sup>385</sup> quoted in Green. p141

**surely give place to a fuller understanding of the divine will made known, and the glory of Christ be furthered through the Church by the Spirit.** <sup>386</sup>

I agree.

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<sup>386</sup> Personal notes taken from Beasley-Murray 1962.



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