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Howard R. Macy

George Fox University, hmacy@georgefox.edu

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Baptism and Quakers

HOWARD R. MACY

THE FRIENDS (OR QUAKER) movement emerged in the 1650s in England, in the middle of the Commonwealth period. This was a contentious and passionate time, full of new religious ideas, of vigorous debate over old practices (including baptism), and of government coercion to practice what the rulers in power considered true religion. In the previous century, King Henry VIII had established the Church of England and partisans still struggled over whether England would remain Anglican or return to Roman Catholicism. In addition, many folks now referred to as Puritans were eager to purify the Church. Some worked within the system; some gave up and left the Church to become Independents, Non-conformists, or Separatists. All in all, it was a tumultuous time out of which new life emerged.

A BASIC STATEMENT OF FRIENDS' APPROACH TO BAPTISM

At their best, Friends teach that they believe in and practice baptism as a spiritual reality, but that they do not use water or ritual to effect or symbolize that reality. Similarly, they regard communion with Christ (the Lord's Supper, Eucharist) as a vital and continuous spiritual reality that does not require ritual or physical elements. Friends intend to make a positive witness. They cherish living in the baptism of Jesus, known by the Holy Spirit and fire, and living steadily in intimate communion with Christ who is constantly present to his people. Indeed, rather than seeing their stance as diminishing the demands of discipleship, many

understand not using the established forms as a way of entering more fully into the meaning of the New Covenant.

The three quotations included here illustrate this basic view. Robert Barclay, the earliest major Quaker theologian, offered these words in introducing his discussion of baptism:

[The baptism of Christ] is a pure and spiritual thing (Gal 3:27), namely the baptism of the Spirit and of fire, by which we are “buried with him” (Rom 6:4; Col 2:12) so that being washed and purged of our sins, we may “walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).¹

In her *A Short History of Quakerism* (1923), British Friend Elizabeth B. Emmott addressed common misunderstandings on this basic stance:

It is not true, as we sometimes hear people say, that Friends do not believe in baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We do believe both in spiritual baptism and spiritual communion. . . . Baptism to us means the Holy Spirit’s power so known and yielded to in our hearts that we live in continual dependence upon His help and guidance. He brings us into such conscious fellowship with God and Christ that we can truly say, “The life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” “I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Gal 2:20).²

A current excerpt from the Faith and Practice of Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends widely represents many Friends today:

We believe Christ’s baptism to be the inward receiving of the promised Holy Spirit, whereby the believer is immersed in Jesus’ power, purity, and wisdom. This baptism is the essential Christian baptism: an experience of cleansing from sin that supplants old covenant rituals.³

Friends themselves have often contributed to misunderstanding when they use verbal shortcuts to explain not using physical elements, and say wrongly that Friends do not baptize and do not have communion. Sometimes they also misrepresent the roots of Quaker practice by suggesting that it came about in response to abuses of baptism and communion in the churches they knew. That is not the case. Surely

1. Freiday, *Barclay’s Apology*, 301.

2. London Yearly Meeting, *Christian Faith and Practice*, par. 213.

3. Northwest Yearly Meeting of Friends, *Faith and Practice*.

abuses and hypocrisy abounded in the tumult of the seventeenth-century English churches, as in many other times and places, but Friends did not witness that their understanding and practice was a reaction to abusive practices. Instead, they explained that it grew out of a transforming experience of the power and presence of Christ. It was rooted in spiritual encounter, not in disgust at abuse.

THE SPIRITUAL ROOT OF THIS WITNESS

The Friends witness about “sacraments” first finds expression in the experience and preaching of George Fox, who is regarded as the principal founder of the Friends movement. George Fox grew up in an ordinary but religiously attuned family. His father earned the nickname “Righteous Christer,” and while George was still a lad, people around him thought he would be well suited for ministry. When he was nineteen years old, his keen sense of integrity pushed him into a search for authentic Christianity. He saw far too many folk who, in his judgment, “did not possess what they professed.” Seeking guidance toward religious experience that penetrated all of life, he approached some of the leading ministers of his time, both Anglican and Separatist, only to be disappointed. In answer to his spiritual hunger they suggested he should sing in the choir or take up tobacco, go get his blood let or get married. Some used their private conversations with him for gossip with the milkmaids or even as sermon material.⁴

With his hopes repeatedly dashed, Fox despaired. He spent long days in solitude, fasting, and the reading of Scripture, but without finding the spiritual root he longed for. Then in the midst this solitariness, Fox claimed to have an encounter with Christ that energized him and, with other experiences of God’s love and power, shaped the whole Friends movement as it arose. He wrote in his journal:

And when all my hopes in them and in all men were gone, so that I had nothing outwardly to help me, nor could tell what to do, then, Oh then, I heard a voice which said, “There is one, even Christ Jesus, that can speak to thy condition,” and when I heard it my heart did leap for joy. Then the Lord did let me see why there was none upon the earth that could speak to my condition,

4. In *Working the Angles*, Eugene Peterson rightly uses this series of ministers as telling examples of how not to offer spiritual direction. See Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 122–27.

namely, that I might give him all the glory; . . . that Jesus Christ might have the pre-eminence, who enlightens, and gives grace, and faith, and power. Thus, when God doth work who shall let [=prevent] it? And this I knew experimentally.⁵

In this experience Fox knew Christ directly, without aid of priest or sanctuary, prayer book or ritual. It went beyond and outside of the experiences he had known in the life of the church. It was direct and unmediated (in any ordinary sense). It brought guidance, transformation, and empowerment. Out of this experiential root Fox began to invite others, often preaching, “Christ has come to teach his people himself,” and living boldly, knowing that “the power of the Lord is over all.” As others warmed to his message and shared his experience of intimacy with Christ, this keen sense of Christ’s presence shaped Friends’ thinking and practice in many ways, including their approaches to worship and decision-making, their understanding of who might offer valid public ministry, their convictions about how God guides people directly and through Scripture, and, of course, their understanding and practice of baptism and communion. Friends’ witness to “spiritual baptism” certainly has its early root in George Fox’s powerful encounter with Christ.

THE BASIS IN SCRIPTURE

Although Friends have rooted their witness and practice about baptism in spiritual experience, they have neither dismissed nor neglected biblical teaching on the meaning of baptism. On the contrary, early Friends and many Friends since have known the Bible well and have relied on it to guide their Christian discipleship. Over the years Friends have come to display wide theological diversity, some attending to the Scriptures more than others, but the guiding discussions on the issue of baptism are deeply informed by reflection on biblical teaching.

One teaching that Friends often call attention to is the New Testament’s frequent contrast between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus. Wherever the baptisms of John and Jesus are mentioned together (Matt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:26–33; Acts 1:5; 11:16, perhaps also Acts 13:23–25; 18:25; 19:1–7) they are distinguished from one another in both character and importance. John the Baptist’s preaching in Matt 3:11 offers a good example: “I baptize you with water

5. Nickalls, *Journal of George Fox*, 11.

for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” Without diminishing the importance of his baptism for repentance, John himself presents baptism with “the Holy Spirit and fire” as greater than his own and as part of the new reality that will come with the greater one to come, the Messiah. Jesus draws the same contrast clearly when he teaches his disciples just before he is “taken into heaven.” He tells them to wait in Jerusalem for “the promise of the Father.” “This . . . is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:4–5).

John’s baptism takes place in the context of, and in contrast to, well-established traditions of water baptism and ritual washing in the Jewish tradition. In Joseph John Gurney’s thorough article on baptism, he offers examples to show that baptism “actually formed a part of the customary Jewish ritual,” to argue against those who, at least in his time, insisted that baptism was “of Christian origin.” Some examples include washings, bathings, and immersions in order to move from uncleanness to purity in keeping with ceremonial requirements. Appealing to rabbinic texts, Gurney also notes the use of baptism as part of the process of conversion, eventually used with the conversion of proselytes who would enter into the Israelite covenant through “circumcision, baptism, and sacrifice.” The proselyte was considered “a child new born” and, in Gurney’s words, “immersion in water was evidently used as the expressive sign.”⁶ Given this precedent, he argues, it is “nearly indisputable” that Christian baptism “was borrowed” from Jewish practice.

Since Gurney’s ministry in the first half of the 1800s, we have learned even more about Jewish ritual purification baths in connection with the Jerusalem Temple, at the community of Qumran, and even in homes. Among other things, we have learned that participants would descend into these cleansing pools by one set of stairs, ascend by another, and running (“living”) water would refresh the purity of the pools.⁷ Of course, this confirms and expands our understanding of Jewish baptismal practice; however, it also sharpens our understanding of John the Baptist’s ministry.

6. Gurney, *A Peculiar People*, 106–12.

7. Anderson, “Jesus and Transformation,” 313.

Paul Anderson points out that John's baptism would have "jarred" the Jewish folks who heard and observed him, but not because it was creating a new ritual. For one thing, "John's immersion of people in the Jordan and elsewhere [served] as a declaration of the prolific availability of divine grace and the life of the Spirit. John's ministry should be viewed as a *contrast* to confining access to the grace of God to ritual means of purification, whether in Jerusalem, Qumran, or other cultic settings."⁸ Also, John's baptizing in the muddy Jordan River called his hearers to genuine repentance, not ritual purity. His prophetic witness called people to a purity of life, not a purity in form. This recalls the prophets Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, among others, who brought scalding judgments of elaborate but empty ceremonies that masked corrupt living. John's baptism, even in its form, made the same point.

The Jewish leaders' response to John the Baptist confirms this judgment. Clearly the Pharisees and others who would have most strictly engaged in acts of ritual purity were not eager to embrace John's ministry. When Jesus asked them whether the baptism of John had come from heaven or had human origin, they declined to answer, knowing in part that their negative judgment of John would offend the people (Mark 11:27–33). The Jewish leaders smarted under John's witness, but Jesus and his disciples honored and embraced it. They shared his call to holy living, to genuinely transformed lives. And they delighted in his pointing toward the coming kingdom of God, to the new era of life and power inaugurated by the coming of Jesus, God's Messiah.

The church, too, embraced John's baptism as a prophetic contrast to the forms of ritual washing in his culture, and they remembered and honored John's role as forerunner and predecessor. His pattern and witness set the stage, but they were not to set precedent. His baptism with water would be superceded by Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit and fire.

ONE LORD, ONE FAITH, ONE BAPTISM

In the light of the sharp contrasts the New Testament draws between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus, Friends have often called attention to Paul's appeal for Christian unity in Eph 4:4–6: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your

8. Ibid.

calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.” Specifically, from this text Friends argue that there is only one baptism and that is the baptism of Jesus, the baptism of Holy Spirit and fire.

George Fox often uses this language in his pastoral letters, very much in the spirit of Paul. For example, he writes, “And so, all strive to be of one mind, heart, soul, Spirit and Faith, living together in Unity, in the Love of God, all drinking into one Spirit, by which you are baptized into one body, having one Head.”⁹ Robert Barclay’s summary characterizes how this text is often used:

The “one baptism” in Eph 4:5 which acknowledges “one Lord,” “one faith,” and so forth, is the baptism of Christ. It is not a washing or dipping in water, but a baptism by the Spirit. The baptism of John was merely figurative of this, and as a figure it was intended to give way to the substance. Although baptism by the Spirit was to be continued, John’s baptism was to cease.¹⁰

Certainly in this letter Paul intends mainly to gather people into unity, so some may wonder whether Friends’ traditional appeal to this text is appropriate. Yet, given that Paul had to scold Christians at Corinth over their pride and quarrels about baptism (1 Cor 1:10–17), Friends teaching here may well help point the way to being joined together in the love of God.

THE APPEAL TO NEW COVENANT AND NEW PRACTICE

In still another important direction, Friends have explained their practice of baptism by noting that Christ introduced a New Covenant and new ways of approaching and worshiping God. Gurney notes that virtually all Christians agree that “when the New Covenant was established in the world, by the death of Christ, the ceremonies of the Jewish law were abolished”—except for two that most Christians still insist on, baptism with water and the physical practice of the Lord’s Supper. He continues: “It is our belief that we have been led out of the practice of these rites by the Spirit of Truth; . . . and that, in fact, they are not in accordance with the entire spirituality of the Gospel dispensation.”¹¹

9. Jones, *Power of the Lord*, 353, letter 341.

10. Freiday, *Barclay’s Apology*, 305.

11. Gurney, *A Peculiar People*, 99–100.

Often Friends point to Jesus' conversation with the woman at Samaria, who seems ready to defend ancient local tradition that the proper worship of God should take place on Mount Gerizim, not in Jerusalem. Jesus replies that true worship is not tied to either place. Instead, "the hour is coming, and is now here," he says, "when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). Quakers have understood this to mean that the new time that Jesus introduces frees worshipers not only from the traditional forms and places of Jewish worship, but also from set forms, places, or rites of any sort. In Robert Barclay's words: "no set form of worship under the purer administration of the new covenant is prescribed for his children by Jesus Christ, the author of the Christian religion. He merely tells them that the worship which is now to be performed is spiritual, and in the Spirit."¹²

To make this approach even clearer, often Friends appeal as well to the teaching of the Letter to the Hebrews, which so dramatically and thoroughly contrasts the Old and New Covenants. Throughout the epistle it speaks of old and new, of the shadow to be replaced by the true form, of better hope, better promises, a better covenant. The old covenant written on stone and full of ceremony is now replaced by a new covenant written on worshipers' minds and hearts. The old covenant with its symbols of sanctuary, sacrifice, symbols of "food and drink and various baptisms," was only to stand "until the time comes to set things right" (Heb 9:10). Then, God "abolishes the first in order to establish the second" (Heb 10:9). That time has now come in Jesus Christ. Friends understand the New Testament to teach that the person and work of Christ is fully sufficient, unaided by sign or ritual.

In *Why Friends Are Friends*, Jack Willcuts calls attention to Paul's teaching that tries to bolster Christians at risk of being misled by "empty deceit" and "human tradition." Paul encourages, "you have come to fullness in [Christ], who is the head of every ruler and authority. In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col 2:10-12). A few verses later Paul is very direct: "Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons,

12. Freiday, *Barclay's Apology*, 263.

or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col 2:16–17).¹³

Friends generally identify Christians’ physical practice of baptism and communion with Jewish practice under the Old Covenant, as of “*precisely the same nature* as the ceremonies of the ancient Jews.” So, Gurney continues, it is “plain (in the opinion of Friends) that such practices do not consist with that spiritual worship, which is described as so distinguishing a feature of the dispensation of the Gospel.”¹⁴ Certainly over the history of the church these forms have developed in a great variety of ways, but that should not obscure the fact that they have root in and grow out of Jewish practices of ritual washing and the observance of the Passover feast. Friends have often wondered that, given all the Jewish ceremonial practices that the church discontinued, these two have endured.

USES OF THE WORD BAPTISM

All interpreters of baptism face the challenge of the varied ways the New Testament reports or speaks of baptism. On the one hand, the reports of baptism show that the church’s practice did not draw from a single or uniform pattern. On the other, the language about baptism sometimes refers clearly to water baptism yet at other points uses baptism with metaphorical or figurative meanings.

New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn points out, as Quakers often have, “*the diversity of form and pattern* in conversion-initiation in Acts.” He concludes that the first Christians did not intend “to establish a particular ritual procedure, far less to determine the action of God in accordance with a cultic action.” Instead, they wanted to “underline the freedom of God to meet faith when and as he pleases.”¹⁵ In any event, it is clear that the early church did not have a single pattern and was not responding in a uniform way to normative instructions.

In a number of places, the New Testament uses the word “baptism” in ways that are metaphorical or figurative and that do not refer to water at all. For example, when Jesus asked James and John whether they could be baptized with the same baptism he was to be baptized with, he

13. Willcuts, *Friends*, 25–33.

14. Gurney, *A Peculiar People*, 105.

15. Dunn, “Sacraments,” 157.

clearly meant a baptism of suffering, not of water (Mark 10:38; cf. Luke 12:50). In his highly figurative reference to the Exodus, Paul says that the Israelites “were baptized into Moses” (1 Cor 10:2). Paul uses figurative language also when he speaks of how Christ cleansed the church “with the washing of water by the word” (Eph 5:26). Gurney discusses at length why we should also regard as figurative Jesus’ words to Nicodemus that people need to be “born of water and Spirit” (John 3:5).¹⁶

The figurative uses of the word “baptism” also provide a context for understanding other New Testament phrases about being “baptized into Christ,” “baptized in(to) the name of Christ,” “baptized into Jesus’ death,” and others. Certainly such phrases do not evoke the necessity of water baptism, though many of the early believers would have had that experience. So Robert Barclay, anticipating modern biblical interpreters’ understanding of “name theology,” asserts that baptism into the name of Jesus is being baptized into the virtue and power of Jesus.¹⁷

Barclay regards Paul’s teaching that “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:27) in a similar way. He says that this is “not merely a form of words to be added to water baptism” but points instead to being baptized “into the power and virtue” of Christ.¹⁸ It is an immersion into the reality of Christ in which we are saturated with and take on the characteristics of the One into whom we are immersed. As Paul uses the other part of the metaphor here, “clothed,” in his letter to the Colossians, that meaning is clear: clothed with “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience . . . Above all . . . with love” (Col 3:12–14).

MATTHEW 28—THE GREAT COMMISSION

Friends generally understand the “Great Commission” in Matthew in this larger context of how the idea of baptism is used in the New Testament as a whole. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:19–20). More recent study of the textual and literary history of the New

16. Gurney, *A Peculiar People*, 119–22.

17. Freiday, *Barclay’s Apology*, 316–17.

18. *Ibid.*, 317.

Testament text has brought some Friends to wonder (with interpreters from many traditions) about when these words, including a Trinitarian formula, became part of the Gospel of Matthew. Biblical scholars ask similar questions about the “second ending” of Mark (Mark 16:9–20), which does not appear in the earliest Greek manuscripts. This contains a commissioning sentence followed by a teaching on baptism (and controversial teachings about picking up snakes and drinking deadly things). Though in this article, these textual issues in New Testament interpretation need to be mentioned, by and large the Friends understanding of the Great Commission has not been shaped by technical points like this. It is relevant to note, however, that there are no examples in the New Testament of a Trinitarian formula like that in Matthew 28 being used with baptism.

All four Gospels report the risen Lord commissioning the disciples for service (Matt 28:19–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:45–53, cf. Acts 1:8; John 20:21–23). They emphasize the importance of taking the good news to the whole world, even “the whole creation,” of drawing people to Christ, of teaching them in obedience to immerse themselves in the virtue and power of Christ and to lead transformed lives. Friends do not believe that the Matthew 28 text should be narrowly interpreted to point to a ceremony of water baptism. Indeed, given the other uses of “baptism” in the New Testament, they believe that it more properly refers to the Spirit-and-fire baptism of Jesus that replaces and supercedes the water baptism of John.

Some regard water baptism as an outward evidence of responding to God’s grace, of entering the kingdom of God. But Friends believe that Jesus gave a simple and clear evidence of grace at work when he told his disciples, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). The reports about the church in the Book of Acts show precisely that evidence. After the disciples received the baptism of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, their love for one another, practically lived out, was winsome and widely noticed.

JESUS’ TEACHING AND PRACTICE

Taken as a whole, Jesus’ teaching and practice preserves the distinction between John’s baptism and his own. Jesus seeking and receiving John’s baptism offers a fascinating intersection of the two men and their ministries.

As Jesus came to be baptized, the writer of Matthew reports (alone here among the Gospels) that John objected and countered that Jesus should more rightly baptize him. John knew that Jesus did not need to submit to a baptism for repentance. Nonetheless, Jesus responded, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" (Matt 3:15). This is a notoriously difficult passage to interpret. A review of commentaries and sermons reveals a wide variety of approaches with many creative but few compelling suggestions. Often, it seems, the suggestions are based on reading back to Matthew from the baptismal practices of the interpreter's own Christian tradition, obviously a risk for all who interpret. Perhaps Matthew, too, was puzzled by why Jesus submitted to John's baptism. Did God require it? Did it forgive Jesus' sin or make him righteous? Did it make a statement?

Without resolving such questions, what the text does not say seems quite clear. It does not say that the occasion of Jesus' baptism sets an example that requires all Christians to follow. It does not teach that the occasion of water baptism is what, in fact, brings Jesus' baptism with Spirit and fire then and now. It does not teach that the righteousness of believers will come about through water baptism.

In an outstanding article, Alan Kolp offers an interesting interpretation of Jesus being baptized, following the work of Edward Schillebeeckx on sacrament. Schillebeeckx defines sacrament as an effective sign of grace, a sign to "be found wherever the unknown God is revealed by and through visible means." Rather than being "things," sacraments are "encounters." So "it is the encounter with this divine realm, with the Lord of heaven and earth, which is sacramental . . . The sacramental occasion is that moment when one experiences the revealed God."¹⁹

In applying this understanding of sacrament to Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist, Kolp notes that the heart of the experience was "a theophany, that is, a revelation or manifestation of God to Jesus." In the images of the Spirit of God descending like a dove and of the voice from heaven declaring "This is my son," God's real presence came on Jesus, and the images, not the water, occasioned the sacramental encounter. "The dove and the voice, then, were visible signs by which Jesus knew and related to a spiritual encounter with the invisible God in heaven."²⁰ In this connection it is interesting to observe that the Gospel of John

19. Kolp, "Friends, Sacraments," 39–43.

20. *Ibid.*, 47–48.

reports only the dove and the voice, not that Jesus was actually baptized in water by John (John 1:29–34).

More traditionally, Friends have denied that Jesus' baptism by John set a precedent that all Christians should submit to water baptism. As we have noted, Jesus would not have had to do this, even as a good Jew. Quakers sometimes point out that even if he had, Jesus was a good Jewish lad who did all manner of things Jewish that do not continue to be part of Christian faith and practice. After all, he was circumcised and properly dedicated in the Temple. He observed Jewish holy days and festivals, though the Pharisees thought he was shaky on the Sabbath. Jesus probably also ate kosher though he was clearly not as good at hand-washing as his Pharisee critics. These are all matters that the church eventually decided not to require of new believers. Clearly, Jesus seeking John's baptism was a particular witness at its time, but it is not presented as and should not stand as a precedent required of Jesus' followers.

In reading the Gospels it seems clear that Jesus did not require water baptism of his followers. They simply left their boats and nets, tax collectors' booths, and homes to follow him. Surely some of his disciples had received John's baptism, but apparently Jesus did not baptize any of them. Friends often point out that even though the repentant thief executed with Jesus was not baptized, Jesus promised that he would that day enter Paradise (Luke 23:42–43). Some of Jesus' disciples baptized (John 3:22), but the writer or editor of the Gospel of John makes clear that Jesus himself baptized no one (John 4:2). As Paul Anderson notes, "Again, the purpose here is not to denigrate water baptism, but to show its historical origin as residing not with Jesus, but with his followers."²¹

Quakers usually observe as well that Jesus did not teach that his followers should use water baptism. This is consistent with the sharp contrast drawn between the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus. Matthew 28:19–20, the "Great Commission," is the single text that many see as a command to use water baptism. (See fuller discussion above.) Even if this verse could be rightly interpreted to mean water baptism, it is striking that a practice regarded by most as crucial should be grounded in a single text.

In considering what Jesus commanded disciples to do, Friends have often made the point that Jesus more clearly told his disciples to wash each others' feet (John 13:14–15) than to baptize with water or to keep

21. Anderson, "Fourth Evangelist," 35.

observing a ritual meal. Of course, some Christians understand Jesus to have commanded foot-washing and do incorporate it in their regular practices. However, most do not, seeing Jesus as giving a stunning lesson about service rather than instituting a ritual act.

PRACTICES IN THE EARLY CHURCH

When the disciples began their life and work together after Jesus ascended into heaven, they were finding their way together, looking to the Spirit to guide as well as empower them. They did not have complete instructions, they had no manual, so they relied on Jesus' words to them that "when the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth" (John 16:13). The Book of Acts reports that they did very well. It also reports that they struggled to settle some controversial new issues: Should they require Gentile converts to be circumcised? Does everyone have to follow the old dietary laws? Is it okay to hang out with Gentiles? and more. At first many of them continued to observe Jewish practices they had known all their lives as they followed the Messiah for whom they had longed. But change was clearly afoot.

One of the issues the new Christian community was trying to figure out was the practice of baptism, reflected still in both the baptism of John and the baptism of Jesus. The reports in Acts show that there was a diversity of practice "in conversion-initiation in Acts—baptism prior to Spirit, Spirit prior to baptism, Spirit without baptism, baptism followed by laying on of hands."²² In speaking of baptism, Friends often point to this lack of uniformity and suggest that the reason for such variety is that they had no specific instruction about whether and how baptism should be practiced. If it were important for Christians to use water baptism, surely Jesus would have taught and showed them.

Jack Willcuts reviews how often the word "baptism" in some form occurs in the New Testament letters. In fourteen letters of Paul (generously including Hebrews here), some form of the word occurs seventeen times, and one time in Peter's epistles. "If in the 21 epistles," he continues, "14 are entirely silent on the subject, we could assume that baptism is not of first importance in their teaching."²³ Significantly, the word "water" is not connected with the word baptism in any of these passages, and, as noted earlier, the uses are often clearly figurative.

22. Dunn, "Sacraments," 157.

23. Willcuts, *Friends*, 30.

Paul uses these words six times in 1 Cor 1:13–17 as he tries to get the Corinthians to stop quarreling in bouts of spiritual one-upmanship about who was baptized by whom and who had the greatest spiritual gifts. At first Paul thanks God he has baptized only two persons—oh, and one household, as far as he can remember. This is a scant number for three years of service founding this new church. Then Paul speaks of his mission: “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel” (1 Cor 1:17). Though Paul does not reject the practice as such, Friends point out that Paul did not regard water baptism as a central or necessary part of proclaiming the good news. Such a response to controversy may also suggest why Paul wrote to the Ephesians about “one Lord, one faith, one baptism.”

HISTORIC PRACTICE AND VARIATIONS AMONG FRIENDS

Though the Friends movement has grown to be widely international and theologically diverse over its 350 years, most Friends still do not practice a physical water baptism. However, Friends vary in their understandings or attitudes about this historic approach.

One group believes that by not using physical elements, Friends can most clearly witness to the power and steady presence of the baptism of Jesus. They want to point toward the reality of baptism with Spirit and fire. To put it more boldly, they believe that using physical elements actually hinders or blocks witnessing to and experiencing the baptism of Jesus. Occasionally someone will put this case forward with such passion and earnestness that Friends will have to take the edge off with a bit of joking about how he (or we) did not really intend to say that water baptism is wicked. At their best, Friends do not believe that. But many do believe that practicing water baptism may in fact obscure the importance of entering into the inward spiritual reality of Jesus’ baptism.

Another segment of Friends are satisfied to say simply that water baptism is not necessary. It is not required of Christians, is not an expected visible sign of discipleship, and is not needed to bring people into Christian maturity. They generally try to explain clearly why they believe water baptism is not necessary, and they avoid the practice of physical sacraments. While not talking of physical sacraments as a hindrance, they do understand how speaking of non-necessity on the one hand while regularly practicing physical sacraments on the other sends an ambiguous message. Practically speaking, they understand that witness-

ing to non-necessity makes it necessary not to use physical elements. This witness and practice, though important, rarely takes a disproportionately central place in the Friends message.

In varied times and places, some groups have re-examined and modified traditional Friends teaching about the sacraments. Among the first to do this were Friends who often use the phrase “freedom from, freedom to,” that is, they are free from any requirement to use physical elements, but free to use them if they wish. They hold that Friends are correct in not requiring physical sacraments and generally agree that the New Testament does not institute such practices. However, they also hold that Friends congregations may use the physical sacraments on occasion without abandoning historic Friends teaching on this. This approach first emerged among some Friends in Ohio during the last decades of the 1800s, apparently under the influence of cooperation and strong relationships between Christian groups in the powerful revival movements of that century. Friends leader David Updegraff’s friendship with revival leader Charles Finney is often noted as historically important in this change. The frequency and character of sacramental practice seems to vary widely among those in this tradition.

Since that time, discussion and controversy about traditional practice has emerged among Friends in a variety of places and for a variety of reasons. Sometimes leaders will disagree with Friends’ historic approach to interpreting the Bible, though it is often the case that these leaders have not investigated Friends teaching very thoroughly. Sometimes Friends are trying to be sensitive to folk who have become part of their congregations but still feel attachment to sacramental practices they may have known with other groups. Sometimes in trying to draw new people into their congregations, Friends, seeking not to be seen as odd, try to minimize the ways in which they think Friends will appear different from other Christians. In these circumstances, traditional Quaker approaches to the physical sacraments may be set aside along with other Friends commitments about a whole Gospel, such as their witness to peace and social justice. Still other Friends wish not to seem harsh in an ecumenical environment and wish to be careful in speaking. Some even incorporate occasional practice of physical sacraments alongside traditional Quaker practice. Even with controversies and exceptions, however, the more traditional approaches still seem to prevail.

While the community of Friends acts in accordance with their understanding of sacrament, individuals often feel freedom to join in physical sacraments with others. For example, Friends ministers may discern that they should agree to an individual's request to be baptized. Or in settings where the invitation is extended, Friends might join with other Christians in the Lord's Supper, either occasionally or sometimes regularly. The community generally respects individual leadings in such matters, particularly if it does not undercut the common witness.

Currently the great majority of Friends are those who have emerged as a result of missionary outreach in the twentieth century. There are many Friends in Africa (especially Kenya) and Latin America, and well-settled and emerging groups throughout Asia. Ron Stansell, a Friends missiologist with wide experience, reports that around the world they tend to follow traditional Friends practice about the sacraments. The exception he notes is in India, where the mission work was initiated by Friends from Ohio who embraced "freedom from, freedom to."²⁴ In some settings, Friends teaching about spiritual baptism has helped bring people into new life. Jack Willcuts writes of serving in Bolivia in a religious environment shaped by an eclectic mix of traditional Christian sacramental practice and animistic belief. He says of new believers, "Upon finding the Lord Jesus and His infilling of the Holy Spirit, their spiritual needs were met in a wonderful and fresh revelation of truth and reality. This experience deepened my appreciation for spiritual communion."²⁵ In every setting, however, Friends throughout the world regard the real evidence of becoming a Christian as a transformed life.

CONCLUSION

Even with their diversity, all Friends would insist that the true mark of being a disciple of Jesus is a transformed life, not a public ceremony. They want individuals and the community together to be people who, in Fox's words, "possess what they profess." Friends often use the phrase "sacramental living" to speak of their conviction that Christ is among us at all times and that our lives should be creative signs of God's presence in the world.

24. From personal conversation with Ron Stansell, Professor of Religion, George Fox University, Newberg, Oregon.

25. Willcuts, *Friends*, 37.

Certainly people in any tradition might become complacent about or routinize their core convictions. Thus, Quakers might carelessly fall into not using water baptism and yet neglect bringing people into Jesus' baptism with Spirit and fire. They might too easily speak of all of life as sacramental without living as visible symbols of God's presence and grace, without being so tangibly part of the Body of Christ broken for the world that in encountering them people sense somehow that they have encountered God. Yet Friends are eager to be faithful. They want to live deeply immersed in the life and power of Christ the Present Teacher, who is among us to guide and empower. They want to be Children of Light through whom God's glory shines in the world.

FURTHER READING

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