

The Ministerial Forum



EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH MINISTERIAL ASSOCIATION

Summer 2005

VOL. 15 NO. 1

BAPTISM AND THE EFCA

The 2005 Mid-Winter Ministerial Conference

The 2005 Mid-Winter Ministerial Conference, gathering at Fellowship Community Church in Centennial, CO, (Jan. 20,21, 2005) focused on the theme of baptism in the EFCA. Biblical and theological perspectives, including both believer- and paedobaptist views, were presented, followed by a historical overview. The conference concluded with some reflections on our own Free Church history and practice of this ordinance. This fascicle of the Forum offers a summary of this conference. To purchase a CD set of the presentations contact NextStep Resources at 1.800.444.2665 or www.nsresources.com.

THE SIGN OF THE NEW AGE: *A Practical Biblical Theology of Baptism From a Baptist Perspective*

by **Bill Kynes**
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When it comes to baptism, I consider myself fairly typical in the Evangelical Free Church of America. By that I mean that baptism has not played a prominent part in my pastoral ministry. Various historical factors help to account for this, especially the origins of our own movement as a reaction against the dead orthodoxy of a state church in which baptism was widely practiced but had little or no connection with spiritual life. Our Free Church forebears rejected water baptism as the definitive mark of membership in the church, emphasizing instead the internal work of the Spirit. Consequently, baptism lost much of its significance as a church

boundary marker. All that is said about baptism in our statement of faith is that it *is* an ordinance for the church and that it is not a means of salvation. Commonly in our churches, one's baptismal status has no connection to church membership or to participation in the Lord's Supper.

This minimal role of baptism is reflected in the fact that, for the forty-plus years of its existence, the church I pastor has had no baptistry. We have borrowed the facilities of a local Baptist church. But as of last December, that has changed. We just moved into a new sanctuary that features quite prominently a baptistry—front and center. Suddenly, I am faced with a new question and a fresh opportunity—What role should baptism play in the life of our church?

The Practice of Baptism in the Bible

When we turn to the Scriptures, we see the practice of baptism burst on the scene without warning and without biblical precedent in the ministry of John the Baptist. It seems almost self-evident that John's baptism—which Jesus himself submitted to—should provide the primary background for understanding Christian baptism.¹ Whatever its precise background, John's baptism was a sign of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Lord. In submitting to John's baptism, Jesus identified himself with the sinful people he came to save.

¹John's baptism is prominent in all four Gospels and is mentioned several times in Acts.

Jesus gathered disciples who, for a time, baptized more disciples than John (Jn. 4:1,2). After his resurrection, Jesus commanded his disciples to make new disciples of all nations through baptism and teaching, and that is just what they did.

On the day of Pentecost, Peter concluded his powerful sermon with this command: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you for the forgiveness of sins . . .” And we read, “those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41). This pattern continued—the apostles preached, and people responded in faith and were baptized (cf. Acts 8:12, 36-38; 9:17,18; 10:47; 16:14,15; 16:31-36).

But Luke tells us that Lydia’s household was baptized (Acts 16:15). Does that nullify this connection between a professing faith and baptism, providing support for the baptism of infant children? Though possible, such a view certainly isn’t necessary. On the day of Pentecost, Peter does say to his Jewish audience, “The promise [of forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit] is for you and your children” (Acts 2:38,39), and so some see this as support for including children in the covenant people of God. But he continues: the promise is also “for all who are far off,”² further defined as “all whom the Lord our God will call.” That calling is illustrated in v. 41: “Those who accepted his message were baptized, . . .”

We can’t assume that every household contained young children or infants.³ And at several points at which households are mentioned, the assumption is that all the members are responsible moral agents—hearing the word, believing, rejoicing, and serving (cf. Acts 16:31-36; 18:8; 1 Cor. 16:15).

John came baptizing; Jesus was baptized; Jesus commanded his followers to baptize, and they did so. The explicit pattern in the New Testament is clear—the apostles preached, and people responded in faith and were baptized. There seems to have been no such thing as an unbaptized believer.⁴

A Theology of Baptism: The Three Actors

But why baptism? What does it do? What does it mean? To explore these questions in this practical biblical theology, let us consider the three actors who play a part in the act of baptism: The person being baptized, the church, and God himself.

I. Baptism as Our Act

First, from the perspective of the person who comes to be baptized, baptism is something we do. Ananias said to Paul, after he had received his vision of the Risen Lord, “now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16). Baptism is an act of calling upon the name of Jesus as Lord and Savior. A person comes to be baptized as an act of faith, declaring allegiance to Christ as the “pledge of a good conscience toward God” (1 Pet. 3:21).⁵ One says to the world, “I have decided to follow Jesus.” In fact, coming to be baptized can be seen as the first public act of obedience to that new Lord.⁶ In the words of George Beasley-Murray, baptism is “a means of prayer for acceptance with God and for full salvation from God, an ‘instrument of surrender’ of a man formerly at enmity with God but who has learned of the great Reconciliation, lays down his arms in total capitulation and enters into peace.”⁷ In the gospel God says “Yes!” to you, and in baptism, in a formal and public way, you say your “Yes!” to him.

In this respect, baptism can be compared to a wedding—the bride has already committed herself privately in her heart to her husband-to-be in the engagement. But at the wedding ceremony that commitment is made public. Baptism is the “I will!” to the call of the gospel in a person’s life.

Baptism is the biblically prescribed action that corresponds to responding in faith to the gospel. It is the outward shape that saving faith is to take in the believer. From the perspective of the person being baptized, baptism is the subjective response to the objective truth of the gospel—the act of receiving in faith what God has accomplished in Christ.

Two Consequences

If baptism is to be tied to the faith of the one being baptized, two things must follow. First, baptism must be freely chosen. No one should be *brought* to be baptized; a person should *come* freely. As a practical matter, baptism must not be a matter of social compulsion, for the outward act of baptism is to reflect a reality of faith in a heart renewed by the Holy Spirit.

Second, if baptism is to be a profession of faith, it must not only be *free*, it must also be *informed*. A person needs to know what he is doing. Certainly, the New Testament examples seem to present the administration of baptism immediately upon a profession of faith. But the church recognized quickly that some catechetical process was helpful to insure that those who were baptized adequately understood the gospel. We rightly insist upon premarital counseling for marriage, and baptism, no less than marriage, should only be undertaken thoughtfully, reverently, and in the fear of God.

Baptism is first of all something we do—it is a public profession of faith, in obedience to the call of the gospel.

2. Baptism as the Church’s Act

It is important to remember that the candidate can only *ask* to be baptized, or better, *respond* to the command to be baptized (Acts 22:16). Baptism is a passive act—someone else must do it *to* you. There must be a second actor, and in baptism that second actor is the

²Whether Peter at this stage understood this expression to include Gentiles is doubtful, but that is the way Paul understood it later (cf. Eph. 2:13).

³The incident with Lydia mentions only women by the river at the place of prayer (Acts 16:13).

⁴Paul’s argument in Rom. 6 requires just that supposition.

⁵Or as some would translate it—“the appeal to God out of a good conscience.”

⁶On the importance of public proclamation, cf. Matt. 10:32; Rom. 10:9.

⁷*Baptism in the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1962), p. 102.

Baptism is a passive act—someone else must do it *to* you. There must be a second actor, and in baptism that second actor is the church. Whether it be an apostle, a pastor, an elder or anyone else so designated by a church, the person who baptizes is a representative of the church of Jesus Christ.

In coming to be baptized, a person desires to be recognized as a fellow-believer and to be joined to the community of the followers of Christ.⁸ So in baptism, the first actor comes as one professing faith in Christ, the second actor, the church, *hears* that profession and *affirms* that profession and then *receives* the one baptized into its fellowship as one of its own.

Baptism has, from the beginning, been seen as the point of entry into the visible body of Christ. On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached, calling for repentance and baptism, and “those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (Acts 2:41). Through baptism, they were “added”—they joined the company of disciples, the church of Jesus Christ. Baptism in the name of Christ is baptism into the body of Christ, and so into the church (cf. Gal. 3:26-29). Baptism was the occasion at which a person was recognized as a Christian. In some parts of the world, it is still that way today, for faith is not considered real until it is professed publicly (cf. Rom. 10:9,10).

In a wedding, which is a public act, a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife, and these two become a new social unit in society. Baptism, like a wedding, is the visible act by which we leave “this corrupt generation” (as Peter calls it in Acts 2:40) and are incorporated into a new and visible community of Christian believers.

Becoming a Christian is a very personal thing, but it is never private. Being adopted as a child of God means you immediately have lots of brothers and sisters, and God calls us to live in a family—a very visible and tangible family embodied in a local church.⁹ Baptism is the initial means by which new believers are recognized by that family and are welcomed into that family, and enjoy the privileges and bear the responsibilities of that family. The responsibility of the church, then, toward those who come to be baptized is to affirm those who offer a credible profession of faith.

We read of Lydia in Acts 16:14 that “The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.” After her baptism, she says to the apostle, “*If you consider me a believer in the Lord come and stay at my house*” (Acts 16:15). That’s what baptism says—we, the church, consider you a believer in the Lord. We affirm your faith and the work of God in your life—we consider you a brother or sister in Christ.

So we as leaders in the church must ask of any candidate for baptism, Is this profession of Christ real? Is it believable? Since no one can truly profess Jesus as Lord apart from the converting work of the Spirit in his heart, the church must ask, What evidence is there of spiritual regeneration in this person’s life?

Obviously, only God knows the heart, and our judgment is only imperfect and provisional. But it is still important for the church to make this judgment lest the church, through baptism, give a person a false assurance of faith. Sadly, this happens all too often. I confess, I have done it myself.

We don’t want to marry people who aren’t ready for marriage, so we shouldn’t baptize people who are not ready to follow Christ. Not only does that put those people in spiritual danger, it also weakens the witness of the church. Baptized unbelievers create a false impression of what it means to be a Christian, thereby hardening hearts and making it harder for us to share the gospel.

This is why baptism is important—it is the church’s act of endorsement that a person is a believer in Jesus Christ, has been converted by the Spirit of God, and can, therefore, be recognized as a member of body of Christ.

Baptism and Children

So when should children become candidates for baptism? This is a difficult area for baptists, but not just for baptists. Paedobaptists must ask the same question when it comes to discerning when a child is ready for confirmation, for communion, or for church membership. It is a difficult question, because the issue of infant salvation is not addressed directly in Scripture and all the clear examples in Scripture of baptism are of adults. Baptists seek to answer the question based on what baptism clearly means in the

case of adults. Paedobaptists seem to answer it by creating a new ordinance altogether.

As a baptist (with a small “b”) I affirm heartily that God can convert children, even in the womb, if he wants to. But the question of when baptism is appropriate for children is complicated by the fact that the decision to be baptized must be free and informed. Young children, living in dependence upon their parents, ought naturally to assume their parents’ beliefs and values, and it is only as they grow to maturity that those beliefs can be owned. If baptism represents a conscious decision to turn from the world and to turn toward Christ, it seems wise to wait until a person has consciously felt the tug of the world, the flesh, and the devil, but has decided, in the face of these attractions, to follow Christ. They should not only be old enough to say “Yes” to certain questions put to them, but also be old enough to say “No.”

When does that happen? There is no set age. But as they enter adolescence, children begin to develop this kind of independent self-awareness, and are increasingly given the responsibilities of adulthood. It is then that the evidences of real conversion begin to manifest themselves more clearly, becoming visible and recognizable by the church. For this reason, waiting until the teenage years for baptism seems appropriate.

Does this mean that younger children are not Christians? No, not necessarily. But in my mind they would fall into a category used in the early church. In addition to members and non-members, the church had a special category of people consisting of catechumens—those undergoing the catechism, the teaching, of the church. That’s what children raised in the church are—candidates-in-training for their baptism.¹⁰ If we wait until we see the fruit of conversion as children grow into their teenage years, we will be on more solid ground as a church in affirming their profession of faith, and their baptism will be more meaningful.

And at their baptism, these young believers will also be ready to assume the responsibilities of church membership as they are welcomed into that

⁹On the community of faith, the disciples of Jesus, as a new family, cf. Mt. 12:46-49; 19:29 (and par.).

visible body of Christ that is the local church, and they will be ready to exercise the moral discernment called for in the church's family meal—the Lord's Supper.¹¹

3. Baptism as God's Act

As we have already seen, baptism can be compared to a wedding. Through our profession of faith, we say "I do"—we pledge our faith to God, promising to follow Christ all the days of our lives. But in a wedding there are *two* who promise. And in baptism, our promise is but a response to the prior promise of God, and that promise of God is reaffirmed, made visible, and, in fact, acted out, in the very act of baptism itself. Baptism is a visible expression of the gospel of God in Jesus Christ. It is God's personal promise to the person who comes in faith. In that sense, God is the third actor in every act of baptism.

The Ministerial Forum of the Evangelical Free Church Ministerial Association

A review of opinions, viewpoints and thoughts addressing biblical issues facing EFCA Ministerial members. Editor, Bill Kynes. Published under the direction of the EFCA Ministerial Association Board members 2004-2005 Chairman: Rev. Harold (Bud) Smith, Dix Hills EFC, Huntington Station, NY; Rev. Ken Cooper, West EFC, Wichita, KS; Rev. Greg Gangwish, EFC, Willmar, MN; Rev. Tom Garasha, Shiloh Community Church, Phoenix, AZ; Rev. Jorge Herrera, Iglesia Calvary De Placentia, Placentia, CA. Please send correspondence to Cornerstone Evangelical Free Church, 3901 Gallows Road, Annandale, VA 22003. (E-mail wlkynes@yahoo.com)

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Baptism, first of all, proclaims God's promise of *death and judgment*—just what our sin brings upon us. Peter, in 1 Peter 3, compares the water of baptism to the overwhelming flood of judgment in the days of Noah. When we were plunged under the water, Paul says in Rom. 6, we were buried with Christ into his death. We went with him to the cross, we entered his tomb, and our old life of rebellion and sin was condemned and died the death it deserved through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

But in baptism we don't stay under the water! We are raised up—"We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Rom. 6:4). Jesus now lives to give us new life. In baptism, we come up out of the water to live that new life in Christ. In baptism, Peter says, we are like Noah in his ark, saved out of the judgment that threatens us (1 Pet. 3:20,21).

In that same passage, Peter reminds us that the water is not only a symbol of judgment, it is also a symbol of *cleansing*. That water washes us clean from the dirt of our sin. Paul recounts the words addressed to him by Ananias, "Get up, be baptized and *wash your sins away*, calling on his name" (Acts 22:16). In Heb. 10:22 we read, "let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and *having our bodies washed with pure water*." And in Eph. 5:26 Paul writes—"Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, to make her holy, *cleansing her by the washing with water through the word*." In some parts of the early church, those who were baptized actually took off their old clothes—the symbol of their old life of sin—and were given new clothes when they came out of the water to symbolize their putting on the righteousness of Christ, reflecting the truth of Gal. 3:26,27.

In baptism, the promise of the gospel is displayed before our eyes, and when we are baptized, we experience that gospel in a physical sense. We are joined to Christ, we share in his death and resurrection, our sins are washed away, and we are given new garments of righteousness. For this reason, it is likely that Paul is referring to the time

of their baptism when he says to the Corinthians, "But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11).

Baptism and the Spirit

The question naturally arises—What is the relationship between baptism and the saving work of the Holy Spirit, for isn't it the Spirit who washes us, who unites us with Christ in his death and resurrection, and who joins us to the body of Christ, the church (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13)? How are baptism in water and baptism in the Spirit related?

The connection between baptism in water and baptism in the Spirit goes back to John the Baptist, who contrasted his baptism in water for repentance, in preparation for the coming of the day of the Lord, with the Messiah's baptism in the Holy Spirit and fire—a baptism of refining judgment marking the beginning of the new age. When Jesus comes to him, John wants to experience Jesus' baptism, but Jesus says, No, not yet—and Jesus submits to John's baptism instead.

After his resurrection, Jesus tells his disciples in Acts 1:5—"John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." They saw this as a sign of the coming kingdom (v. 6), but Jesus speaks instead of this being the inauguration of the age of mission—"you will be my witnesses," he says (v. 8).

The relationship of baptism in water and the reception of the Spirit in the rest of Acts is ambiguous, if not confusing. On the Day of Pentecost, the promised Spirit comes upon the 120 in the Upper Room, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel without any mention of baptism. Then in his sermon, Peter links the reception of the Spirit directly with baptism (Acts 2:38). Elsewhere in Acts the reception of the Spirit comes after baptism (Acts 8:14-17; 19:5,6), before baptism (Acts 10:47,48), or with no mention of baptism at all (Acts 18:25).

¹⁰Cf. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*, p. 373. Cf. also evidence of the children of Christian parents as catechumens at the time of John Chrysostom: J. N. D. Kelly, *Golden Mouth: The Story of John Chrysostom—Ascetic, Preacher, Bishop* (Baker, 1995), p. 19.

We may rightly conclude from this that God is sovereign. He can act however he likes, and the work of his Spirit is not tied to any outward act. However, enough of a connection between baptism in water and the reception of the Spirit is established that, theoretically at least, the two should be linked. Baptism in water is the outward act that pictures the inward regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.

In this sense, baptism is to be the sign of the new covenant promise of the prophets found so clearly in Ezek. 36:25,26:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean;

I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols.

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you;

I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

This is what Jesus was referring to when he said to Nicodemus that “no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (Jn. 3:5). The kingdom which he came to bring was a fulfillment of the promise of a new covenant, a kingdom of the new age, characterized by life in the Spirit, and water is the sign and symbol of the outpouring of that Spirit.¹²

John was the final representative of the old order, the old covenant (Mt. 11:11f.). His was a baptism of *preparation*. But the church’s baptism, the baptism given to us by Jesus, is the sign of actual *participation* in the new order, the new covenant. The church’s baptism in the name of Jesus Christ unites us to Christ, and through Christ, brings us into the new age of the Spirit. Christian baptism is the visible sign of that regenerating work of the Spirit which enables us to become children of God—“children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God” (Jn. 1:13).

The best background for understanding Christian baptism, then, is not the circumcision of the Old Testament, as paedobaptists argue, but the eschatological baptism of John. As Paul says in Gal. 6:15—“Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new cre-

ation.” Baptism symbolizes not the circumcision of the flesh but the “circumcision without hands” (Col. 2:11,12)—spiritual regeneration. And in the new covenant, it is to the true children of Abraham, the children of faith, that baptism now rightly belongs (cf. Phil. 3:3; cf. Gal. 6:15; Rom. 2:28,29; 4:11,12).

Baptism is the picture of a promise, the visible sign of an invisible grace. It is a sign of God’s promise to us in the gospel, and it serves as a seal of that promise as God acts in baptism to confirm the truth of the gospel in our hearts. When we come in faith and are baptized into the triune name, God puts his seal upon us and claims us as his own.

Consider the marriage illustration once again. The ring gives the promises in the wedding a physical representation. The ring is given as a sign of a promise given and of a promise received. Baptism is like a ring—given to us as a visible sign to remind us of the promise of God, a promise which we in faith have received.

Baptism is a visible form of the gospel, but it is more than just the proclamation of the gospel found in preaching. Baptism is also a visible expression of the response that ought to accompany the gospel, for baptism is itself an act of faith and obedience.

Baptism, properly ordered, is, in the words of Beasley-Murray, the embodiment of the gospel: “In baptism the Gospel proclamation and the hearing of faith become united in one indissoluble act, at one and the same time an act of grace and faith, an act of God and man.”¹³ And, I would add, it is also an act of the church by which a believer is received and welcomed into the body of Christ, the family of God.

A Personal Postscript:

If I hold to this theology of baptism, why am I not a Baptist? I offer three reasons:

1. History. I recognize that paedobaptism has been the practice of the overwhelming majority of Christians throughout most of church history. This includes the practice of the Protestant Reformers, to whom I owe a great theological and spiritual debt. I humbly recognize that I could be wrong about paedobaptism, and

for this reason I do not insist upon my position on baptism as a grounds of church fellowship.

2. Charity. Even if the baptist position is correct, I still want to receive my paedobaptist brothers and sisters as fellow believers. The time and mode of baptism is not an essential aspect of the gospel, and so I will not make it a barrier to church fellowship.

3. Theology. Baptism presents a visible and objective declaration of the gospel, and its validity as such is not nullified by the absence of the proper subjective response of faith. In such cases it remains a valid baptism, though not an effective and completed one. This is similar to the preaching of the gospel. Its validity is not nullified by a failure of the hearers to repent and believe. But when they do, that preaching achieves its appointed end.

On this ground, I can accept the paedobaptism of someone who has later come to faith as a valid baptism, though only their subsequent response of faith has completed that baptism and made it effective. However, since I am convinced that baptism properly ordered according to God’s design is to embody both the objective promise of God in the gospel and the divinely-inspired subjective response of faith, I will not baptize infants, and I will “re-baptize” those who so request it. I believe the latter is a matter of personal conscience of the believer and is not required. ■

¹²Cf. John 4:14; 7:37,38.

¹³Cf. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism*.

PAEDO-BAPTISM:

A Biblical-Theological Argument for the Transgenerational Nature of the Sign of the Covenant

by Willem A. VanGemerén

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(Reported by James Waldron Creekside
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Comparing the nineteen pages of his handout to Dr. Kynes' single page outline, Professor VanGemerén began his talk humorously acknowledging the complexity of his argument for paedobaptism. Since Scripture itself does not explicitly deal with the question of infant baptism, it becomes necessary, he argued, to go back to the Old Testament and ascertain the basic pattern of God's covenant relationship with his people.

The Place of the Abrahamic Covenant

Dr. VanGemerén's focus was overwhelmingly upon the Abrahamic covenant, not just because it is the first covenant with Israel, and therefore foundational for what follows, but more importantly because it "sets the pattern in substance and sign for the new covenant expectations." As in the new covenant, salvation is initiated by a gracious God (Gen. 12:1-3; cf. Titus 3:5) and justification is by faith alone (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1-17). We also see that the righteousness of God is not merely received internally by faith, but outwardly sealed to Abraham and his children in a symbolic act: the covenant rite of circumcision (Gen. 17:7,11; Rom. 4:11). This, it will be argued, corresponds to the rite of baptism in the new covenant (Col. 2:11-12). In order to properly frame our understanding of the new covenant then, it is essential for us to first outline the structure and purpose of the Abrahamic.

To rightly understand the covenant with Abraham as it is unfolded for us in Genesis 12-50, we must read the story of the patriarchs in the context of the whole Pentateuch. The immediate context of Abram's call in Genesis 12 is the scattering of the nations at Babel in the previous chapter. Dr. VanGemerén noted that the Hebrew word for "clans"

or "families" (*mishpachoth*), which is used of the nations catalogued in chapter 10 (see 10:31-32) and scattered in chapter 11, is the same word used for those "families" of the earth God will bless through Abraham and his seed in 12:3. In other words, the story of the patriarchs demonstrates God's concern for the world at large and not just the Jewish people.

The broader context of Genesis 1-11 confirms the universality of the covenant's scope. Indeed, chapters 1-3 in particular are cosmic, instructing Israel that God is no mere tribal deity, but the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. Moreover, the background against which Genesis 12-50 comes to us is a world that is clearly under judgment and curse—a world groaning for redemption. Beginning with the description of mankind's fall in chapter 3, the antediluvian narrative vividly recounts the evils and corruptions of the race, climaxing in the tragic pronouncement of 6:5ff., and ending dreadfully with the great flood of God's wrath in chapter 7. This serves to underline what VanGemerén terms the *transgenerational rebelliousness* of Adam's children.

Certainly there were bright stars in the midst of that dark night (e.g., Enoch, Lamech, Noah). But there was a lack of continuity, a lack of transgenerational stability. In view of this, VanGemerén argued, it is apparent that God's covenant with Abraham and his offspring is the divine "antidote" to the transnational and transgenerational rebelliousness of the human race. In other words, in committing himself to Abraham and to his children, God is committed to the formation of a *transgenerational community of faith*—a continuous line of godly men and women (spiritually) descended from Abraham. Hence, VanGemerén con-

cluded, we learn that God is not just concerned with saving individuals, but with families, with generations.

At this point VanGemerén stated that the Abrahamic covenant should not be understood primarily in terms of physical descendants. Certainly there is concern for the children of the patriarchs (Gen. 15:5; 17:7), but this concern extends beyond the patriarchs themselves and their physical descendants who walk by faith to include the Gentiles who believe like Abraham (cf. Gen. 17:2-6; Rom. 4:11-24). That the covenant is for the sake of the nations and not merely Israel, VanGemerén insisted, is confirmed to each of the patriarchs.

Moreover, the Pentateuch is very much concerned with the spiritual realities that accompany salvation and not merely the physical aspects of the covenant with Israel (i.e., progeny, circumcision, and land [Gen. 17:1-10]). In fact, VanGemerén argued, Genesis 12-

*in committing himself to
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50 was originally penned for the wilderness generation and serves as a witness against their consistent rebellion (which is recounted for them in Exodus and Numbers). They were condemned for their failure to imitate the patriarchs. Though circumcised in the flesh, the sons of Israel failed to be

circumcised in heart (e.g., Dt. 10:16; cf. 30:6; Rom. 2:28-29), and so demonstrated that they were not truly sons of Abraham. The Pentateuch, then, serves as a testimony against the nation of Israel in their failure to walk in the footsteps of Abraham, and so be true members of the transgenerational community of faith.

The Hope for a New Humanity

That this community would continue through the generations was the hope of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel. When Jacob, the blessed son of Isaac (Gen. 27:28-29), the promised son of Abraham (15:4), in turn blessed his own son Joseph in 48:15-17, his desire was that the line of godly people would "greatly increase upon the earth." VanGemerén identified this

part of the eschatological dimension of the Abrahamic covenant: the hope for a new humanity.

This eschatological dimension is evident from the very beginning. When Abraham first left his family's settlement in Haran to follow the Lord, it was no mere earthly city in the land of Canaan he was seeking, but "the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb. 10:11; cf. Rom. 4:13). Similarly, when Lamech named his son "Noah" (Gen. 5:29), he expressed his longing for rest through the final (i.e., eschatological) removal of the curse (cf. Heb. 4:9-10; Rev. 22:3). In a word, the hope of the godly has always been a new creation: a restored cosmos, liberated from the curse, and a righteous humanity, faithful to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (cf. Rom. 8:20-25).

Yet, Dr. VanGemeren concluded, Israel as a nation did not and would not continue in the path of the covenant. But it was not as though the covenant of God with Israel failed! For one, we are reminded that the covenant was not just for Israel, but for the sake of the nations. Secondly, to quote the apostle Paul, "not all Israel is Israel." Being a physical descendent never guaranteed one a share in Abraham's eschatological inheritance (e.g., Mt. 3:9-12).

Sign and Seal

When God gave the covenant to Abraham and his children, he also gave the sign of circumcision (Gen. 17:11ff.). As noted, the sign of the covenant does not guarantee true membership (which is by faith). Spiritual authenticity was just as crucial then as it is now in the new covenant. But the sign did mark the child as a member of the visible community of Abraham.

Circumcision thus served as a reminder to the child that he is responsible for himself and for his family to live as a faithful participant of the community, and so demonstrate the authenticating work of God's Spirit in his life. Here VanGemeren distinguished between the "sign" of the covenant (i.e., circumcision and baptism) and the "seal" (i.e., the regenerative work of the Spirit). The sign is rich in what it signifies, but its significance is only apprehended through faith. Moreover, it

is more fully apprehended as we grow in faith, such that "sealing" can be understood as a process, rather than simply as an event. However, the sign yet "seals" a measure of grace to the recipient prior to individual faith. This grace, VanGemeren explained, is the acceptance of the child into the community of the redeemed as "clean and holy" (see 1 Cor. 7:14). Here he pleaded with Free Church pastors not to baptize infants in the privacy of their studies or the parents' homes, but during the worship service. It is a "church event", whereby the child is received into the life of the congregation as a participant of the visible community.

A New Way of Life

As with regard to Moses' original audience, the life of the community is to be modeled after the faithfulness of father Abraham, to whom God said, "Walk before me and be blameless!" In Abraham we see not only salvation received by grace through faith alone, but an ongoing lifestyle of faithfulness and integrity. VanGemeren added that the sign, accompanied by the sealing of the Spirit, produces the patriarch's vision of the new humanity, the new creation. As a result, these true members of the covenant are willing to suffer alienation and persecution in this world, as did the patriarchs before them, for the sake of the righteous God who will usher in a new creation. He calls this "a kingdom vision," and encouraged the audience as pastors and parents to cultivate this vision in their children, as opposed to merely offering them a list of do's and don't's.

Dr. VanGemeren reiterated his conclusion that the Abrahamic covenant anticipates and models the new covenant, both in demonstrating the righteousness by faith and the eschato-

logical promise of the new creation. Furthermore, as we trace the progress of redemption through Moses, David, and the Prophets, we see that the Abrahamic covenant, both in its transgenerational structure and its soteriological and eschatological substance, provides the framework for the new covenant. After a brief overview of the Mosaic and the Davidic covenants and how they anticipate the new, VanGemeren focused on the prophets—particularly Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Joel. For example, he noted the new covenant promise of the coming Spirit in Isa. 59:21 and the transgenerational emphasis in the passage. He compared this to the apostle's statement in Acts 2:38-39, insisting that the picture painted by Isaiah and Peter is a line of faith, passed on from grandparents, to parents, to children, etc., with the Spirit sealing the promises of Abraham to believers and their children.

A Final Word

VanGemeren concluded his talk with a three-fold appeal to his audience. First, he encouraged the Free Church to maintain its diversity on the baptism question. Second, he encouraged the churches to embrace paedobaptistic pastors in their midst. Lastly, he repeated his plea that those who do practice infant baptism not do so in secret, but openly and publicly, offering a full explanation of its meaning and significance. ■

BAPTISM IN CHURCH HISTORY

By Scott Manetsch

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(Reported by James Waldron
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Reading from Eph. 4:4-6, Dr. Scott Manetsch noted the irony that Paul would appeal to the "one

baptism" of the church as a basis for unity at Ephesus. Baptism, of course, is and has been a major source of contention and division among Christians. Is baptism a sacrament conferring grace or an ordinance that, among other things, testifies to faith? Is baptism rightly received by infant children of believers or by confessing believers only? Should this ceremony be per-

-formed through immersion alone or are pouring and sprinkling appropriate? In the battle over baptism, oceans of ink have been spilled, and, tragically, a good deal of blood as well.

Why look at this question historically? As George Santayana famously said, "Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it." Positively, his-

bishop. Only after all this could the baptized persons receive the Lord's Supper.

Generally, there is a trend in church history toward delaying baptism for the sake of catechetical instruction. The baptismal liturgy became especially elaborate, perhaps indicating an almost magical view (e.g., baptismal re-

away sins and sanctify a man unless he also has the Holy Spirit." Moreover, several early Christian authors defend the primacy of faith for salvation (e.g., *Letter of 1 Clement*, 32,33), *contra* an *ex opere operato* view of the sacraments.

So, by the third century, some did apparently see a power inherent in the "sacred waters." Yet many early church fathers present baptism as a sign and a seal of God's saving work. As a sign, it was a testimony to faith and an initiatory rite. But as a seal of God's grace, it was understood that something was happening in the process. Hence the close connection we find between the symbols and the realities symbolized in the church fathers. Whatever the case, it is clear that baptism is of central importance in the religious life of the early church. Baptism was neither optional nor marginal in the lives of believers.

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torical study can and will enrich our understanding of Scripture. By studying the past, we enter into a rich conversation with great thinkers and exegetes of the past, who strove to understand the same texts we struggle with today. Ultimately our authority is not St. Augustine, Luther, or Calvin, but the Word of God. Nevertheless, *Sola Scriptura* does not mean that Scripture is our only source for theology, but that Scripture *alone* is our ultimate and final appeal.

Development in Baptismal Practices

In the earliest Christian writings outside of the New Testament, baptism appears to be a rather simple ceremony. According to the *Didache* (c. 100), converts are apparently baptized without any prolonged period of catechetical instruction, and the ritual itself, in contrast to later developments, was unadorned and minimal. Baptism was to be done by immersion in cold, running water if possible (apparently representing the living water mentioned in John 4). If not, pouring was deemed acceptable (as was the use of warm water).

Only a century later, baptism was to become a very involved and ornate ritual. We read in Hippolytus' *Apostolic Tradition* (c. 215) that the catechumen would have prepared for this baptismal service with three years of preparatory instruction. The elaborate ceremony included a rite of exorcism, a confession of the Trinity, a threefold immersion in the water, anointing with oil, the donning of new robes, and receiving a holy kiss from the presiding

generation). We see again that immersion is the preferred mode. Usually baptisms took place in natural or existing sources of water such as rivers, fountains, pools, and the sea.

Baptismal Theology

The first full discussion on the meaning of baptism comes from Tertullian in the early third century in *On Baptism*, but it is in his *Against Marcion* that Tertullian succinctly outlines four basic gifts conferred in baptism: 1) forgiveness of sins, 2) deliverance from death to life, 3) regeneration, and 4) bestowal of the Spirit. These elements are testified to by other church fathers as well.

But to what extent did the early church believe that the rite of baptism actually bestowed what it proclaimed? What is the precise connection between regeneration and the baptismal waters?

This question is difficult to answer as there are real tensions within the sources. Some of the texts indeed sound as if at least some of the fathers would have been close to a doctrine of baptismal regeneration. However, from what we know regarding the practice of the church, there were careful restrictions on who might be baptized. Baptism was administered to those who *already* displayed the fruits of repentance and spiritual transformation. Thus Cyprian says, "Water alone is not able to cleanse

The Baptism of Children

What about children? Did the early Christian church baptize infants? Again, Tertullian is the earliest Christian author to explicitly discuss the matter (*On Baptism*, c. 200). Ironically, he argues against the practice of baptizing infants, which was practiced in Carthage at the time. Tertullian's concern seems to be for those who would waver from the faith after their baptism. The question, of course, is whether he is combating a novel practice or one that has apostolic origins.

Within fifty years of the appearance of Tertullian's treatise, infant baptism was being practiced in many regions within the Christian world. We see this practice reflected in the works of Hippolytus, Origen, and Cyprian. Origen could write, "the Church has received a tradition from the apostles to give baptism even to little children" (*Comm. in Rom.*, 519). In fact, Cyprian and 66 other bishops of the North African church formally approved infant baptism immediately following birth, rather than delaying baptism till the eighth day (perhaps paralleling the Jewish tradition of circumcising infants

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on the seventh day). Hence, by the year 251, infant baptism was regularly practiced in North Africa with the sanction of the church.

On these matters historians are in agreement. But there are four main areas regarding the history of the early church's practice of baptism where historians do not agree. First, is there implicit evidence of infant baptism before the year 200? For example, some suggest that Polycarp's testimony of being Christ's servant "for 86 years" before his martyrdom in c. 155 indicates that he was baptized as an infant or small child.

Second, historians disagree whether the testimony of later church fathers can be trusted when they claim that infant baptism has apostolic origins. For example, in the early fifth century Augustine wrote, "The custom of our mother church in baptizing infants must not be disregarded, nor be accounted needless, nor believed to be other than the tradition of the apostles."

Third, does the practice of postponing baptism in the fourth century prove that believer's baptism was still the preferred mode at that time? During this period, we find that children born of Christians are not baptized until their 20s and 30s. The list of those baptized later as adults includes such notables as Gregory of Nazianzus (b. 329), John Chrysostom (b. 344), Basil the Great (b. 331), Ambrose (who was baptized *after* he was elected bishop), Jerome (b. 342), and the great Augustine (b. 353). Is this evidence that baptism of infants was not normative in the early church? Or does this reflect the prevailing view at the time that (particularly heinous) sins committed after baptism could not be forgiven? It should be noted that Ambrose, Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine all argued for the baptism of infants.

The Argument from Silence

Finally, how should we interpret the silence of the early centuries? On the one hand, credobaptists argue that the silence in the sources of the first centuries on the matter of infant baptism is strong evidence that the practice was not apostolic. Moreover, infant baptism, it is argued, appears incompatible with the practice of the early

church with its required catechetical instruction and a confession of faith. Hence, Tertullian's defense of believer baptism is a scriptural defense against a post-apostolic development.

On the other hand, paedobaptists argue that there is implicit textual evidence for the practice of baptizing infants. The fact that the texts are silent in condemning infant baptism, or in prescribing a minimum age for baptism, or making a provision for infant children of believers, all suggest that the OT practice of circumcising infants served as the model of emerging baptismal practice.

Baptists in the Middle Ages?

What about baptismal practices during the Catholic Middle Ages? Were there believer baptists after Augustine and *before* the Reformation? Augustine was pivotal in the development of medieval sacramental theology. In 418, at the 16th Council of Carthage, the rejection of infant baptism is anathematized under the influence of the great bishop of Hippo. Augustine believed that baptism was necessary for salvation. He did not argue that the waters of baptism were magical, but he did argue that the promise of God was that, through them, original sin was washed away, and for adults it washed away both original and personal sin. This would be the doctrine of the Catholic Church for the next thousand years.

But were there underground Baptists during that period? Some have maintained that the Paulicans and Petrobusians were examples of such groups, preserving the apostolic tradition and rejecting infant baptism. Unfortunately, these groups were heretical. The Waldensians are often included among those who rejected infant baptism, and they were orthodox, even evangelical. However, it is not clear that they rejected infant baptism *per se*, as much as the baptism of the Roman Catholic Church in particular.

Baptism and the Reformation

The three great reformers, Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin, would have an enormous impact on the church's understanding of the sacraments. They all believed in infant baptism, and they all participated directly or indirectly in the persecution of Anabaptists. Unlike Augustine, all three held out hope that unbaptized infants who died would be saved. All three rejected baptismal regeneration (despite the latter developments of certain Lutheran theologians). Lastly, all believed that re-baptism was unnecessary for those who converted to Protestantism from Catholicism.

Luther's defense of infant baptism against the Anabaptists was varied and ultimately, for many, theologically unsatisfying. Luther's contribution to paedobaptistic theology may be summed up in his phrase: "When faith comes, baptism is complete." It was Ulrich Zwingli, who, through his heated debates with the radical disciples at Zurich, would blaze the path for the covenant-theological argument, paralleling baptism in the new covenant to the old rite of circumcision.

Calvin would go on to argue that, in addition to being a confession of faith (per Zwingli), baptism is also a means of grace by which God nourishes and fortifies our faith. Following the Swiss reformer, he would argue that children of believers are part of the

Augustine was pivotal in the development of medieval sacramental theology.

covenant of grace, and thus rightly receive the sign of the covenant. Calvin further developed Zwingli's covenant argument, and teased out more fully the parallel between circum-

cision and baptism.

Regarding the so-called radical reformation, scholars today have painted a complex picture of the early Anabaptist movement, showing that the movement did not simply arise from among the Swiss brethren around Zurich, but that independent sources developed in southern Germany and Dutch Netherlands. Most famous are Ulrich Zwingli's disciples (e.g., Felix Manz and Conrad Grebel), who went on to defy their teacher and the Zurich city council, embracing believer's

baptism, and so embracing their own deaths in 1525. Anabaptist suffering would only increase as the years wore on, particularly after 1529, when Charles V declared adherence Anabaptism a capital offense.

Perhaps better known is the Dutch priest turned persecuted radical reformer, Menno Simons. There are three notable themes within Simons' prolific output. First, faith does not follow from baptism, but baptism follows faith. Second, infants are not capable of faith and repentance, and hence should not be baptized (thus rejecting Zwingli's and Calvin's parallel of baptism and circumcision). Third, baptism is the public initiation of the believer into the life of radical discipleship. It is the public act of taking up the cross and following the Suffering Servant.

Conclusions and Questions

In view of this historical survey, we may draw a few conclusions. One, this brief overview challenges us to revisit the question of the theological meaning of baptism. Is it merely a sign, a public testimony of faith, or is baptism something more? The testimony of the early church and the theology of Luther and Calvin affirms that baptism is *both* sign and seal of God's grace

Second, we are challenged to reaf-

firm our unity in "one baptism." A great strength of EFCA is that it welcomes both infant and believer baptism into fellowship. There is historical justification for caution over this issue. We should be careful about being dogmatic about silence, yet we should also determine how this general principle is to be applied in matters of baptismal practice. For example, in light of the charity of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin regarding Catholic baptism, is it appropriate for us to

There is historical justification for caution over this issue.

(re)baptize believing adults who were baptized as infants in a Christian church? Also we may consider whether it is appropriate for believers to take part in the Lord's Supper who have not yet expressed their discipleship through baptism.

properly for believers to take part in the Lord's Supper who have not yet expressed their discipleship through baptism.

Lastly, we would do well to reconsider the priority of the ordinances of both the Lord's Supper and baptism within our worship services. Is baptism a significant event in the life of our churches or is it a marginal (even optional) observance? How often do we celebrate the Lord's Supper and does it reflect the significance it has had for God's people throughout the centuries, or is it treated as an add-on in our services? ■

Core Biblical Commitments

As one considers EFCA history, there are five core biblical commitments that have served as the foundation for many of the decisions that have been made theologically and practically in our movement: 1) "Where stands it written?" is an expression of our commitment to the Bible as our sole authority—*sola Scriptura* (bibliology). 2) "All believers but believers only" states our commitment to being a believers' movement and includes within it a statement of our understanding of salvation (soteriology) and of the church (ecclesiology). This statement is both inclusive ("all believers") and exclusive ("believers' only"). 3) "Major on the majors and minor on the minors" is rooted in our theology (doctrine). We would not waver on the major doctrinal issues, but neither would we divide over minor matters. 4) "In essentials unity, in non-essentials charity, in all things Jesus Christ" gets at the heart of our lives together, our fellowship (ecclesiology). 5) Our "Blessed hope" focuses on Christ's return and the urgency and hope that accompanied it (eschatology). These five commitments created and then manifested the ethos or spirit of a movement which continues to this day and which should inform our discussion of baptism.

The Concerns of Our Forebears

The EFCA traces her roots to the Reformation of the sixteenth century, with a commitment to the five *solas* of the Reformers: grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone, Scripture alone and God's glory alone. Moreover, there was a strong belief in the priesthood of all believers. This is why there was such great concern when the state—Sweden, Norway, Denmark—determined what the church would or could do. Because Lutheranism was the state church, clergy were state employees, with the result that some were unconverted. Moreover, the state also determined church membership and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. Based on the spiritual seriousness which one ought to bring to the Lord's Supper, there was an additional concern that the Supper was celebrated by some who were unconverted.

BAPTISM IN THE EFCA

by Greg Strand

EFCA Director of Credentialing and Biblical Theology

Why This Topic?

The EFCA is now two, three, and four generations beyond the merger of 1950. For the framers, the Statement of Faith (SOF) was at the core of their being; it was a living document. For "children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren," it has become a statement or document, but it may (or may not) be living. Both time and history have blurred the bib-

lical and theological underpinning of the SOF. As a result, the EFCA history and our SOF may not be known well, which has given rise to many people concluding that their own position equals the EFCA position. Specifically, the EFCA position on baptism is one of the things that makes this movement unique. Since this ordinance has not been formally discussed in a large EFCA gathering since the merger, many have narrowed our unique position, which is why it is time to discuss this important matter once again.

In fact, A. T. Olson concluded that “the cup was the catalyst” for the founding of the EFCA.

Resolution, Creed or Statement of Faith

In the Free Church movement, there has always been a commitment to the Word of God. For many this was sufficient. There was no need to have a creed outside the Bible (which by default becomes a creed). Moreover, there was also a concern that if anything was “added” beyond the Bible it sounded too much like the state church from which they came, a creed devoid of life. In 1884, the Swedish Evangelical Free Church drafted a single statement that addressed the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible. In 1912, the Evangelical Free Church Association, Norwegian-Danish, approved a SOF that included 12 articles. Article 8 said this regarding baptism: “We believe that the Lord has given His Church two sacraments: baptism and communion. 8.1. Baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Freedom of conscience is given as to age and mode.”

In preparation for the merger, the Ministerial Association of the EFCA (Swedish) approved a resolution in 1947 that contained nine articles. Interestingly, the tenth article, that was not included, contained a statement about the necessity of believer baptism by immersion. The editor of *The Evangelical Beacon* (July 1, 1947) explained the rationale for its exclusion: “Though almost all of our pastors advocate and practice water baptism by immersion, they were willing to leave this out of their doctrinal statement in consideration of the views of a limited number who hold that water baptism is not necessary for this dispensation of grace.” This meant that the EFCA (Swedish) SOF said nothing about the ordinances.

On June 13, 1950, two days prior to the adoption of the general statement by the merger conference, the Ministerial Association of the Evangelical Free Church of America (Swedish) adopted an amendment to their Statement on the ordinances, which became article 10: “We believe that water baptism and the Lord’s Supper are ordinances to be observed by the Church during the present age. They are, however,

not to be regarded as means of salvation.” This became article # 7 in the 1950 EFCA merger SOF, to which we subscribe to this day.

The Merger Statement of Faith

As the SOF was drafted, there were a number of important foundational guiding convictions regarding baptism. The founders emphasized union with Christ and fellowship with other believers, as there were godly believers on both sides of this issue—paedo- and believer-baptists. Moreover, they had lived through far too many divisions over baptism (e.g. Anabaptists, Johan Bomstad in 1852, Finland [Swedish] in the 1930s). This meant that the statement would be born through concessions on minor matters, without compromise on the major matters. Most in the Free Church movement were baptistic, i.e. they believed that baptism was to be of believers and the mode was through immersion (though not necessarily Baptist—requiring believer baptism for membership), but they refused to make this the litmus test for fellowship or membership. The founders were very clear that baptism is a biblical command, so it must be practiced, but there was freedom of conscience regarding the time and mode. There is no equivocation on the requirement for baptism and the necessity of salvation by grace through faith. But there is among Free Church people liberty with charity on the time and mode of baptism.

Another important principle was that requirement for membership in the local church must not be greater than membership in the universal Church. Therefore, nothing was required beyond faith in Christ alone (salvation). Rooted in the core biblical truths stated above, the founders were aware that the Free Church was an evangelical movement that was not primarily about baptism, but rather about the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture, the deity of Christ, and regenerate membership. Article #7 in our SOF would not only contain affirmations, but also denials, which addressed both current trends and ancient traditions.

Specifically, we state in article #7 that “We believe that water baptism and the Lord’s Supper are ordinances

to be observed by the Church during the present age. They are, however, not to be regarded as a means of salvation.” In this article, we say “yes” to this being an ordinance, but “no” to this being a sacrament in any salvific sense. We say “yes” to baptism, but “no” to a denial of the necessity of baptism for this present age (responding against the current trend of hyper-dispensationalism [Bullingerism, O’Hairism, Grace Fellowship]). We say “yes” to being saved by grace, but “no” to baptismal regeneration (responding against an ancient tradition found in the mainline churches that had embraced an *ex opera operato* understanding of the ordinances).

Strengths and Weaknesses

There are both strengths and weaknesses in this movement known as the EFCA. First, we count it a strength that this is a fellowship of believers that is not sectarian. There are not many minor things that will divide us. Rather, we fellowship around the major biblical truths. Second, we model, at least to some degree, the oneness for which Jesus prayed in His High Priestly Prayer (John 17). Third, the founders kept their finger in the text, were aware of history and tradition, and were discerning of current trends and how those beliefs were chipping away at the foundation of the gospel. This is very important for us to remember today.

But we must also acknowledge some weaknesses. First, the expression “a means of grace” has wrongly been equated with “a means of salvation.” God has ordained multiple “means of grace,” i.e. those means he has ordained in the Word for the spiritual sustenance and nurture of the believer. But these means are not salvific. Second, ordinances have become a non-essential for fellowship, and by default they have been understood as an *adiaphora*, i.e., a matter of indifference, and are too often neglected. Third, the ordinances have not been studied much or understood well. There has not been careful thought about how the ordinances are to be a central part of the life of the church. There is no sense how they relate to one another.

Conclusion

We must be committed to working out this motto: *Ecclesia Reformata et Semper Reformanda*—the Church Reformed and Always Reforming. That’s

a good reminder to us. We are always reforming to the Word of God, where it stands written! ■

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS *from our EFCA President Bill Hamel*

This conference has been a great reminder of one of the reasons I am proud to be the President of the Evangelical Free Church of America. Those gathered have modeled our distinctive of being able to discuss, even debate, differences of theological understanding while accepting other viewpoints. What other denomination has built into its DNA a clear understanding of the major theological issues while allowing distinct differences on what we have identified as minor issues? The conference participants deserve recognition for the spirit and enthusiasm of the discussion.

While the EFCA is a Bible-centered movement, we must admit that our history both describes and to some extent has determined who we are. The ordinances of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper have played a significant role in that historical development. Following the revival that swept across northern Europe with the resulting “readers groups” (small groups) of believers springing up, our “free church” forefathers began to recognize the troubling reality of unregenerate clergy administering the ordinances in the state churches. As Dr. Olson has stated, the catalyst for the development of a new believers’ movement was the cup. However, baptism was the motivation for massive numbers to immigrate to North America, because baptism determined one’s birth certificate, citizenship, and burial rights, and all three were controlled by the state church.

Warm-hearted believers who saw the emptiness and abuse of ritual without a transformed heart did not reject infant baptism or the Lord’s Supper. They did, however, believe that these ordinances should be administered in the context of a believer’s church.

As the “free church” grew and moved toward merger in this country, it was influenced by Moody Bible Institute and dispensationalism. However, mode and timing of baptism were not major issues at the time of the writing of our Statement of Faith. Article seven of the Statement of Faith does address two issues of the day (1950)—baptismal regeneration and a form of hyper-dispensationalism that denied that baptism was for the church age.

As the grandson of a Dutch immigrant Presbyterian pastor, I had the privilege of being raised in the distinctive ethos of the EFCA by godly parents. However, it was not until I was a second year student at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School that I was confronted with the importance of being baptized as a step of obedience to Christ. Somehow, this wonderful movement of God, which was historically linked to the importance of the ordinances by the 1950s, had devalued them. In the three Free Churches I attended as a child and young man, baptism was ignored and too often the Lord’s Supper was an obligatory rite with very little thought given to the observation. I have come to the conclusion that I missed 23 years of rich meaning and worship surrounding the ordinances.

Concluding Exhortations

Therefore, let me conclude with four exhortations. First, I encourage you to **understand and honor our EFCA heritage**. Our EFCA forefathers paid a price for the privilege of celebrating the ordinances as a believers’ church. They resolve to be biblical with a commitment to unity and acceptance of others with a differing biblical view within broader evangelical parameters.

Second, can I challenge you to **rethink your biblical theology and practice of the ordinances**? I am not attempting to change your theology, but rather challenging you to know what you believe. Do you attach the same value to the ordinances as our Lord did and the Scriptures do? Can I challenge you to a fresh study of the biblical texts? A clear theology of the ordinances will lead to meaningful celebration. It is my observation that the ordinances are not a significant worship experience in many of our churches. Is this the result of poor theology?

Third, please **retain or build the EFC ethos in your church**. Hold your positions with humility, always remembering that the Scriptures are inerrant, not our interpretation. The EFCA is a believers’ movement that doesn’t exclude believers from fellowship over interpretations of the Scriptures that are not included in our core beliefs. This ethos has historically been part of the wonderful dynamic we have enjoyed.

Finally, I challenge you to **lead your congregation in meaningful celebration of the ordinances**. The lack of teaching on the ordinances or routine observance give evidence to our devaluation of the rites Christ gave us to celebrate. While we may shy away from the terminology “means of grace,” the ordinances are given to us by our Lord to nurture the faith of his people. It is my conviction that baptism and the Lord’s Supper were given to be central to our worship and discipleship. If this can be defended biblically (and I believe it can), why are the ordinances not more meaningfully observed in many churches?

Biblically and historically, the ordinances have been prominent and meaningful. Are they in our ministries today? ■