Churches of Christ and Baptism: An Historical and Theological Overview

Douglas A. Foster
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Introduction

Although the polity of Churches of Christ precludes total uniformity within the movement, one may safely say that members of Churches of Christ have historically held (1) that scriptural baptism consists of the immersion of penitent believers and (2) that this act is the culmination of a process of salvation begun with faith in Jesus Christ and followed by faithful service to him in the setting of a congregation of fellow believers—the church. (3) With those prior understandings we could affirm, if we were creedal people, the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, “We believe in one baptism for the remission of sin.”

An historical discussion of the understanding of baptism in Churches of Christ must be divided into two periods: first, the thought of early leaders of the Stone-Campbell Movement, particularly Alexander Campbell, Walter Scott, and Barton W. Stone; and second, more recent thought in Churches of Christ as an identifiable communion separate from other parts of the Stone-Campbell Movement.

The Thought of Early Restoration Movement Leaders on Baptism

*Thomas and Alexander Campbell*

Both Thomas and Alexander Campbell were Presbyterians, members of the Old Light, Anti-Burgher Seceder Church of Scotland. As such they had been baptized as infants. Each eventually came to hold believers’ immersion as NT baptism, yet apparently neither doubted he had been a Christian before his immersion.

As early as 1809 the Campbells had raised some question about the validity of infant baptism in regard to their strong belief that Christian unity would come about only on the basis of speaking where the Scriptures speak...
and being silent where they are silent. The issue came to a head for Alexander in 1812 when his first child was born. He began a serious study of baptism and concluded that he himself had not been scripturally baptized. He determined to submit to immersion and persuaded a Baptist minister, Mathias Luce, to perform the act. His wife, parents, a sister, and two others were immersed on the same occasion, on a simple profession of faith in Christ.

The small congregation the Campbells formed at Brush Run, Pennsylvania, united with the Redstone Baptist Association in 1815. Alexander Campbell became a champion for the cause of believers’ immersion, debating Presbyterians John Walker in 1820 and W. L. MacCalla in 1823. There is, however, a discernible shift in Campbell’s understanding of the purpose of baptism during the decade of the 1820s.

In the debate with Walker, Campbell clearly states that baptism is emblematic of the salvation already received by those who believe. The renewing of the Holy Spirit preceded and led the believer to baptism as a representation of that completed work of God. Campbell’s understanding was essentially that held by most Baptists at the time.

By the time of the debate with MacCalla, Campbell had begun to make a much more intimate connection between baptism and the remission of sins. He still insisted that forgiveness and salvation come only by the blood of Christ through faith in him. “Real,” or “actual,” forgiveness comes through faith in Jesus Christ apart from baptism. Yet the “formal” remission of sins comes in the act of baptism.

Behold the goodness of God in giving us a formal proof and token of [forgiveness], by ordaining a baptism expressly “for the remission of sins!” The water of baptism, then, formally washes away our sins. Paul’s sins were really pardoned when he believed, yet he had no solemn pledge of that fact, no formal acquittal, no formal purgation of his sins until he washed them away in the water of baptism. To every believer,

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2 Ibid., 391–400.


therefore, baptism is a formal and personal remission, or purgation of sins.\(^5\)

By the end of the 1820s, however, Campbell had moved well beyond even this “novel” position to merge the points of actual and formal forgiveness: “I do earnestly contend that God, through the blood of Christ, forgives our sins through immersion—through the very act and in the very instant.”\(^6\) A person is not clean before he or she is washed, Campbell argued. The clearly visible marker between the state of nature and the state of grace is the act of baptism. No one has any proof of the forgiveness of sins until baptism.\(^7\) No one has ever received proof of pardon of sin by faith only. Water baptism, with faith as the principle of action, is the means through which God by the power of the blood of Christ imparts remission.\(^8\)

Well over one third of Campbell’s systematic theological treatise, The Christian System, is devoted to an exposition of his understanding of baptism and remission of sins. He is quite explicit in his assertion that baptism is the act by which our state is changed:

As soon can a person be a citizen before he is born, or have the immunities of an American citizen while an alien, as one enjoy the privileges of a son of God before he is born again. . . . [I]f being born again, or being born of water and the Spirit, is necessary for admission, and if being born of water mean immersion, as clearly proved by all witnesses; then, remission of sins can not, in this life, be constitutionally enjoyed previous to immersion. If there be any proposition regarding any item of the Christian institution, which admits a clearer proof or fuller illustration than this one, I have yet to learn where it may be found.

. . . the apostles, in all their speeches and replies to interrogatories, . . . always commanded and proclaimed immersion as the first duty, or the first thing to be done, after a belief of testimony. . . . Immersion alone was the act of turning to God. Hence, in the commission to convert the nations, the only institution mentioned after proclaiming the gospel, was the immersion of the believers, as the divinely authorized way of

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carrying out and completing the work. And from the Day of Pentecost to the final Amen in the revelation of Jesus Christ, no person was said to be converted, or to turn to God, until he was buried in and raised up out of the water.  

Furthermore, Campbell explained that the “washing of regeneration” spoken of in Titus 3:5 was synonymous with immersion. Immersion was not a simple physical act.

There is no such thing as outward bodily acts in the Christian institution; and less than in all others, in the act of immersion. Then it is that the spirit, soul, and body of man become one with the Lord. Then it is that the power of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit comes upon us. Then it is that we are enrolled among the children of God, and enter the ark, which will, if we abide in it, transport us to the mount of God.  

Campbell’s view was sacramental in nature, yet was a via media between evangelical Protestant and Roman Catholic understandings. Only penitent believers were proper subjects for baptism; personal faith and repentance were essential. Yet in baptism there occurred a real change of state.

The Campbells and their associate Walter Scott, the greatest early evangelist of the movement, worked as Baptists for almost fifteen years. Yet it became clear to many Baptist leaders that the position Campbell came to hold on baptism was not the position taken by most Baptists. By 1830 many Baptist associations were divided concerning the “Reformers” positions. Some, such as the Mahoning Baptist Association, of which Alexander Campbell’s congregation had been a member, dissolved themselves as an unscriptural body. Others issued condemnations of Campbell and his views. Sharp separation between the “Reformers” and their Baptist colleagues ensued.

Campbell’s mature view of baptism appears to be rigid and without exception. There were, however, two matters about which Campbell would be pressed in the 1830s that had important implications for his teachings on baptism. The first had to do with one’s knowledge at the time of baptism. Is the immersion of persons who do not understand their sins to be remitted in

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11 Ibid., 216.
that act valid? In other words, does ignorance of the full significance of one’s immersion invalidate it and require the person to submit to “rebaptism”? Second, are there Christians who have not been immersed? Are all those who live lives of faith in Christ but who, through ignorance or honest misunderstanding have never been immersed, condemned to eternal damnation?

Campbell’s answer to the first question was clear. If a person had been baptized upon a simple confession of faith in Jesus Christ, he or she was a citizen of God’s kingdom. The only thing that could justify someone’s rebaptism was if the candidate confessed that he or she did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God, at the time of the first immersion.**13** Campbell certainly believed that it was in baptism that one’s sins were forgiven. Yet this knowledge at the time of one’s baptism was not an essential component of the necessary faith. Trust in a person, not comprehension of a list of facts, was the essential. Perfect knowledge of all that is effected in the act of baptism was not a prerequisite for its validity. Otherwise Paul would have reimmersed the Roman, Galatian and Corinthian Christians since he had to explain to all of these groups the very meaning of baptism.**14**

Campbell stressed that remission of sins was God’s work from first to last. In baptism the penitent believer receives this blessing on the condition of faith in Jesus. The believer has done nothing worthy of praise, but only has received something worthy of thanks. Baptism does not save because of one’s faith in baptism! It saves because of one’s faith in Jesus. No one has perfect knowledge of the nature of Christ’s atoning work or any number of other concepts connected with baptism. Yet baptism’s effectiveness is based not on one’s understanding or lack of understanding, but on faith in Jesus as Savior.**15** To tell people that their baptism was invalid because they did not know that in baptism their sins were forgiven was to negate Jesus’ own statement in Mark 16:16, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved.”

Concerning Christian identity and salvation of unimmersed believers, Campbell made his clearest statement in a series of articles in 1837 in

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**14** Campbell, “Reply to Susan,” 419.

response to a letter from a woman in Lunenberg, Virginia. The incident must be understood in the context of a sharp controversy between Campbell and John Thomas, a charismatic British medical doctor who had moved to Virginia and become a leader in the Reform movement. Thomas had begun a militant advocacy of rebaptism based on knowledge of remission at baptism and had gained a strong following. In July 1837 a Thomas supporter wrote Campbell a sharp note expressing surprise that he in an earlier article had written that Christians were to be found in all Protestant parties. “How does one become a Christian?” she asked. “Does the name of Christ or Christian belong to any but those who believe the gospel, repent, and are buried by baptism into the death of Christ?”

Campbell’s reply was to the point:

But who is a Christian? I answer, Every one that believes in his heart that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the son of God; repents of his sins, and obeys him in all things according to his measure of knowledge of his will. . . . [I]t is possible for Christians to be imperfect in some respects without an absolute forfeiture of the Christian state and character.

I cannot make any one duty the standard of Christian state or character, not even immersion into the name of the Father, of the son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well-grounded hope of heaven.

There is no occasion, then, for making immersion, on a profession of the faith, absolutely essential to a Christian—though it may be greatly essential to his sanctification and comfort. My right hand and my right eye are greatly essential to my usefulness and happiness, but not to my life; and as I could not be a perfect man without them, so I cannot be a perfect Christian without a right understanding and a cordial reception of immersion in its true and scriptural meaning and design. But he who thence infers that none are Christians but the immersed, as greatly errs as he who affirms that none are alive but those of full and clear vision. 16

Campbell’s answer caused quite a stir. Some complained that he had effectively neutralized what they had been preaching on the importance of baptism for remission of sins. Campbell answered that he was certainly not speaking about those who rejected one of Christ’s ordinances or who willingly neglected to ascertain the will of the Lord. Such were not Christians.

Rather, he spoke of those "who through a simple mistake, involving no perversity of mind, [have] misapprehended the outward baptism." Since baptism was both an inward and an outward act, it was possible for a person to be changed inwardly yet not to be scripturally baptized.

Though Campbell was willing to admit the Christianity of at least some unimmersed believers, his recognition did not extend to accepting them as members of the visible church—the kingdom of God on earth. He disagreed with Barton W. Stone, whose movement generally practiced "open membership." We can judge only by one's visible obedience, Campbell insisted. We cannot set aside a commandment of God and receive persons into the church who have not been immersed into the name of Jesus. God will ultimately judge the heart of unimmersed believers, but they cannot enjoy the fellowship of God's visible kingdom on earth.

Barton W. Stone

Though Barton W. Stone preceded the Campbells in his reformatory work, baptism was not as crucial an issue for him and his movement. After charges of heresy were brought against some of Stone's Presbyterian associates following the Cane Ridge revival in 1801, he and they withdrew from the Synod of Kentucky in 1803 and formed their own Springfield Presbytery. As early as 1800, one of the reform leaders, Robert Marshall, had become convinced of the truth of believers' immersion. Stone, in trying to dissuade Marshall from this "error" and from uniting with the Baptists, engaged in an exchange of correspondence with him. In the end, Stone recalled that Marshall's arguments were so convincing that he abandoned the practice of infant baptism.

Stone says, however, that about that time the "great revival" broke out and that he was distracted from the subject of baptism for several years. When the matter did surface again in his movement, evidently around 1807, Stone asserts that he and others preached baptism for remission of sins. Yet he admitted that "[i]nto the spirit of the doctrine I was never fully led, until it was revived by Brother Alexander Campbell, some years after." The matter was left to the individual's conscience. Forbearance was to be the

20 Ibid., 61.
rule, those who chose immersion not despising those who did not and vice versa.

Stone became increasingly aware of the work of the Campbells during the 1820s. When he and Alexander Campbell met for the first time in 1824, Stone remarked that the only substantive doctrinal difference he saw between the two of them was Campbell’s teaching of baptism for remission of sins. Even this, Stone added, he had once taught and practiced but had let it go from his mind until Campbell revived it.21

Eventually Stone came to hold the same positions held by Campbell except for one. As noted, Campbell denied formal fellowship and communion in the “visible church” to unimmersed persons. In other words, unimmersed persons were not generally allowed to become members of a congregation affiliated with the Campbell reform movement. Stone, while defending the doctrine of immersion for forgiveness of sins, did not exclude the unimmersed from membership in the churches that were part of his movement:

We therefore teach the doctrine, believe, repent and be immersed for the remission of sins; and we endeavor to convince our hearers of its truth; but we exercise patience and forbearance towards such pious persons who cannot be convinced.22

Stone believed Campbell was wrong in his exclusionary stance.

Summary

The positions outlined above are the most basic beliefs concerning baptism within the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement, from which Churches of Christ emerged. The ideas held in common in all parts of the movement include (1) that scriptural baptism is immersion of believers and (2) that baptism is the act in which God remits the sins of the penitent believer. Ideas over which there has been controversy in the movement include (1) whether knowledge of the “design” of baptism (remission of sins) is necessary for its validity, (2) whether the “pious unimmersed” (at least some of them) will be saved, and (3) whether the pious unimmersed may be admitted to membership in the churches (open v. closed membership).

In reality, much more could be said concerning the intricacies of the understandings of baptism than what appears in the lists above. This rather stark view does not comprehend every facet of the belief and teaching in the Stone-Campbell Movement concerning this important Christian institution.23

21 Ibid., 75-76.
23 See, for example, Alexander Campbell, Christian Baptism: With Its Antecedents and Consequents (Bethany, Va.: A. Campbell, 1853); Robert Milligan, An
Less discerning teachers who reduced baptism almost to a mechanical action were not representative of the thoughtful and more spiritual leaders, though sometimes it seems the first group was in the majority.

**Baptismal Belief in Churches of Christ**

These five points have, however, to a great extent defined much of the discussion concerning baptism within Churches of Christ. We emerged as a separate body in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This separation from the Christian Churches or Disciples of Christ was not precipitated primarily by questions regarding baptism, though the principles involved did have implications for those matters.

For the most part, the fate of the pious unimmersed was not a subject for speculation among Churches of Christ. The matter of open membership did become a divisive wedge between the conservative and liberal wings of the Christian Churches in the early 1900s, but again, was not a consideration for Churches of Christ. This group inherited the most conservative stance from the early movement; that is, only those who believe and are immersed are Christians. They also held without wavering that it was in the act of baptism that forgiveness of sins took place. Baptism was “completing one’s obedience,” and salvation was not received until obedience was complete.

The most controverted matter has been that of one’s knowledge at the time of baptism. Twice major battles have erupted within Churches of Christ over this issue. The arguments in both cases reflect the earlier fight between Alexander Campbell and John Thomas.

**The Austin McGary - David Lipscomb Controversy**

David Lipscomb was perhaps the most significant leader and thought shaper in Churches of Christ in the postbellum era and the early twentieth century. He edited the *Gospel Advocate* from Nashville, Tennessee, for almost forty years.

Lipscomb taught that baptism was the act in which a person’s state was completely changed “from one of alienation and rebellion against God to one of acceptance and favor with him.” He insisted that God’s law required all

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24 This group would eventually suffer its own bifurcation, forming what are today the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the undenominational fellowship of Christian Churches and Churches of Christ.

who would be saved to believe, repent, and be baptized. "If they fail to believe and be baptized, they shall be damned, says the Lord." All a faithful Christian could do was to teach what God had commanded and insist on obeying it. If God had ever told anyone that he or she could be saved without baptism, or by substituting affusion or sprinkling for baptism, Lipscomb stated, he had never been able to find it. The entire line of thought, he insisted, was a deliberate attempt to change God's law and to admit people whom God had not authorized into God's church. It was, in fact, a great sin and deception against the unimmersed to give them the impression that they were safe and in the church of God while they refused to obey God in what Lipscomb once called "his test ordinance." While Christians should kindly bear with and associate with unimmersed believers, he said, they must use every opportunity to urge them to obey the truth, for there was no promise in the Bible for those who refused to perfect their faith by obedience in baptism.

Lipscomb held that if a person believed in Christ, repented of sins, and, desiring to obey God, was immersed, that person was added to the kingdom of God. It made no difference where or by whom the baptism was performed as long as those scriptural components were present. Lipscomb readily admitted that persons in Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and other denominations who had been properly baptized had been added to Christ's church, though he believed they should leave those sectarian organizations to be pleasing to God. Furthermore, he contended that such simple obedience secured all the blessings and privileges promised the Christian regardless of the believer's knowledge of them.

(8 June 1871): 532.


32 David Lipscomb, "Sectarians in the Worship," Gospel Advocate 49 (25 April 1907): 265. "They ought to get out of the sectarian churches, but they see so much sectarianism in the non-sectarian churches that they think they are all alike."

33 David Lipscomb, "Brother McGary's Scripture Authority," Gospel Advocate
Lipscomb differed from Campbell on the matter of the unimmersed. Lipscomb, like Stone, saw it inconsistent to admit that pious unimmersed persons would be saved by God and yet refuse them admittance into the fellowship of the churches of the movement. Lipscomb simply refused to speculate on the state of the unimmersed, taking at face value what he believed the Scriptures to say concerning who would be saved.

On the other hand, Lipscomb’s Campbellian position on the validity of immersion without the knowledge that it was for the forgiveness of sins provoked the ire of a group of rigorists. In 1884 Austin McGary founded a journal titled the *Firm Foundation* to promote the teaching that immersion simply to obey God was not sufficient to make the act valid.34 McGary and others insisted that any who had been immersed and become members of another religious group be “rebaptized” in order to take membership in a church that was part of the Restoration Movement.35

Lipscomb contended that God would not reject service done in obedience to God’s law simply because one did not wait to learn all the blessings and promises connected with that obedience.36 The rebaptism group countered that those baptized into “sect baptism” were not baptized for the right reason; they often believed that their sins were already forgiven and that their baptism was for the purpose of joining a particular denomination. Lipscomb admitted that perhaps that was often true; but neither was “sect baptism” restricted to those outside Churches of Christ:

Baptist baptism is a baptism submitted to in order to get into the Baptist Church, or it is done in obedience to Baptist teaching. If a person is baptized to obey God, it is not Baptist baptism no matter where or by whom performed. A rebaptist baptism is that which is done to please those who believe in rebaptism. Many of the rebaptisms are done to please the preacher or church who requires it. It is not unusual for a person to say: “I will be rebaptized if you think I ought.” When one is then baptized, it is rebaptist baptism. Both these baptisms ignore the authority of Christ or the Scriptures, and are not acceptable to God.37

Lipscomb pointed out to the rebaptism forces that it made no sense for a person who had begun a journey and gone a long way on the right road,

36 (18 January 1894): 37.
36 Lipscomb, “Brother McGary’s Scripture Authority,” 37.
upon taking a wrong turn, to return to the very beginning. So it was with those who had been scripturally baptized and yet found themselves in sectarian establishments. Such a subsequent wrong turn did not undo their faith, repentance or baptism; they should simply get off the wrong road and back on the right one: “We only return to the point at which we erred and there begin aright, he insisted.”

Lipscomb made the argument that “for the remission of sins” in Acts 2:38 was not part of the command that humans were to carry out. It was, rather, a result of the obedience to the command. Remission of sins was completely God’s work. The reason Peter gave the statement as he did in Acts 2:38 was that the people on Pentecost were guilty of the blood of Jesus. This is one application of the general law “he that believes and is baptized will be saved.” Forgiveness of sins is not the only blessing given by God in baptism, but that is what those people needed to hear. God conveys all the blessings he has promised when one believes and is baptized.

The debate between the Gospel Advocate and the Firm Foundation raged during the 1890s and into the twentieth century, the era of the major division between the Christian Churches/ Disciples of Christ and the Churches of Christ. The strong controversies that surrounded that schism and the fear of theological liberalism pushed many in Churches of Christ into a reactionary mode. The rigorist position held by McGary became the majority view, though the more moderate Lipscomb position never disappeared, especially in Middle Tennessee, where Lipscomb’s influence was greatest.

It is significant to note that the rigorist position represented by John Thomas and Austin McGary mirrors the Landmarkist ideas of valid baptism that were strong among Baptists during the same periods. In Churches of Christ, the phrase used for unacceptable immersion was “sect baptism,” while among Baptists it was designated “alien baptism.” The possibility of significant connections between the two rigorist movements is great, though the subject has been examined only superficially thus far.

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40 For a complete discussion of the “rebaptism” controversy both before and after Lipscomb see Jimmy Allen, Rebaptism? What Must One Know to Be Born Again (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing, 1990).

More Recent Controversies Concerning Baptism

(I) The most recent controversy over rebaptism among Churches of Christ appears to have been at least partially prompted by the extreme positions taken by congregations affiliated with the International Church of Christ (known variously as the Boston Movement, earlier the Crossroads Movement, or generically the Discipling Movement). Because these churches teach that they are the only true Christians, they insist on reimmersing all who come into their fellowship, even those previously baptized "for remission of sins" in a Church of Christ.

This position is the logical end to which a person accepting the rigorist understanding must come. For many in mainstream Churches of Christ, the approach of the International Church of Christ has forced a reexamination of the subject. Many of that movement's harshest critics, however, maintain a similar view and practice and are quick to label those who are less strict as advocates of open membership and false doctrine.

The many articles published in our periodicals in the 1980s and 1990s indicate that the rigorist "rebaptism" position is being promoted by both moderate and far-right leaders. Few refer to the earlier discussions and the arguments made by the early leaders. Those who have done so have usually been subjected to accusations of heresy. Even those who believe that immersion performed outside the ranks of Churches of Christ might be valid often insist that such baptism can be accepted only if the person was aware beyond a shadow of a doubt that in the act his or her sins were remitted.

An incident that took place in 1985 illustrates the point. The September 19 issue of the Gospel Advocate carried an article by preacher and Restoration Movement scholar J. M. Powell. In the article Powell quoted Alexander Campbell and others to the effect that while the Scriptures teach that remission of sins takes place at baptism, one's knowledge or lack of knowledge of that fact does not affect the act's validity. J. M. Powell, "Baptismal Question," Gospel Advocate 127 (September 19, 1985): 564. A series of responses followed that lasted well into the next year denying the validity of one's immersion without that knowledge. See, for example, Cecil May Jr., "Baptism and Remission of Sins," Gospel Advocate 127 (November 7, 1985): 658; Foy E. Wallace Jr., "Bible Baptism, A Response," Gospel Advocate 127 (November 21, 1985): 676; Dabney Phillips, "Tampering with Baptism," Gospel Advocate 128 (March 6, 1986): 146. Though Powell asked for space to clarify the issues, the editor refused to publish anything else by Powell on the subject.

Only Jimmy Allen, widely respected Bible teacher and evangelist, has openly sided with the “Lipscomb” position in his 1991 volume *Re-baptism? What One Must Know to Be Born Again*.

(2) Antagonism between some in Churches of Christ and some in Baptist Churches has been evident in recent years. Of course, debates between the two groups have been common since the earliest days of the Stone-Campbell Movement. In recent years, however, the most vitriolic attitudes of the past have characterized the encounters for the most part. Some members of Churches of Christ have debated Bob Ross of Pasadena, Texas, and others of similar belief. Ross has written and reprinted several books and pamphlets exposing the heresies of “Campbellism.”

Though specific arguments in the encounters have centered on matters such as the meaning of *eis* (for) in Acts 2:38, the greatest point of contention has been over whether Churches of Christ teach baptismal regeneration. The Baptist protagonists insist that we do teach baptismal regeneration, or “water salvation,” while those involved in the debates have emphatically denied the charge.

If by baptismal regeneration the accusers mean that the act of immersion inherently regenerates or converts or saves a person, then the charge is not true. From the earliest days of the Stone-Campbell Movement, the teaching has been that the only proper subjects for baptism are those who have faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and who repent of their past sins. It is the blood of Jesus that cleanses people from all sin by his grace. Baptism is not a ritual act that has inherent redeeming power. It is not true that when people “get baptized,” they are automatically “born again.”

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The most common understanding among Churches of Christ is that it is in the act of baptism, this culminating act of surrender of one's life to God in faith and obedience, that God, by the merits of Christ's blood, cleanses one from sin and truly changes the state of the person from an alien to a citizen of God's kingdom. Baptism is not a work, at least not a human one. It is the place where God performs His work—the work that only He could do. If this constitutes baptismal regeneration, then we are guilty of the charge. It certainly is a sacramental view of baptism.

Another view, though decidedly a minority one and often labeled heretical by the mainstream, is that one becomes a child of God at the point of belief in Christ. David Lipscomb insisted that as an unborn child is unquestionably the child of its father, so the person who believes is just as much the begotten of the father, the child of God, before it is baptized as it is afterwards. The difference is: one is a born child; the other an unborn child. Unless the unborn child is brought by the birth into a state suited for developing life, it will perish.

Leroy Garrett, controversial editor of Restoration Review for over three decades, expressed the same idea in articles in 1982 and 1990.

When does life come to the sinner? When he believes that Jesus Christ is the Son of God! "He that believes on me has eternal life," Jesus said in Jn. 5:24. Again and again the Scriptures make it clear that one has life when he believes. Even the Church of Christ recognizes this, even if not enthusiastically, for we concede that baptism typifies the birth of the child of God, not the beginning of his life. Life begins with faith! Just as physical life does not begin at birth, so the believer's life does not begin with baptism but when he accepts Jesus as Lord and Savior.

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48 See the argument by Arlie J. Hoover concerning necessary and sufficient causes for salvation. Hoover explains that while baptism is a necessary cause because of the commands to be baptized, it is not a sufficient cause; i.e., by itself baptism cannot save. God's grace is the only sufficient cause. Arlie J. Hoover, “A New Slant on an Old Issue,” *Firm Foundation* 94 (September 13, 1977): 579.


Garrett insisted, however, that baptism was God’s work of grace and an essential part of God’s plan.  

Conclusion

Since the earliest days of the Stone-Campbell Movement, baptism has been a priority issue. We are certainly not unique in this. Baptism has since the beginning of the church been at the very core of questions of Christian identity, of salvation, of the church. At no time in the history of Churches of Christ have we relegated baptism to a matter of insignificance. Our controversies have arisen over the precise nature of the human part in baptism and the possibility that innocently unimmersed persons would experience a “baptism of the heart” that would save.

Whether or not the complaint is valid that Churches of Christ have emphasized baptism too much depends on one’s viewpoint. Many are convinced that we have not emphasized it enough. We have not yet plumbed the profound depths, the infinite richness, of the meaning of baptism. We have not focused on the “weightier matters” surrounding this act that is absolutely central to Christianity. And we may not always have recognized its continuous importance for the life of the believer.

Baptism is related not only to momentary experience, but to life-long growth into Christ. Those baptized are called upon to reflect the glory of the Lord as they are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, into his likeness, with ever increasing splendor.  

May this transformation—and not controversies—truly characterize our belief and practice of baptism.
