"The Circumcision of the Christ": The Significance of Baptism in Colossians and the Churches of the Restoration

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"THE CIRCUMCISION OF THE CHRIST": THE SIGNIFICANCE OF BAPTISM IN COLOSSIANS AND THE CHURCHES OF THE RESTORATION

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The practice of believers' baptism is central to the Restoration tradition of Christian faith and practice. Accordingly, there has been no shortage of reflection on the importance of baptism in the writings of leading figures of the Restoration Movement, in the teaching of its churches, or indeed in the pages of Restoration Quarterly; in the forty-two volumes of the journal completed to date, baptism figures prominently in no fewer than thirty-three articles. Of these, the great majority (20) appeared in the journal's first decade, over a third (12) in the first year of publication; this perhaps reflects a decline of interest in the topic of baptism in the past four decades, at least among the movement's scholars. In any case, it remains undeniable that the baptism of believers as the mark of entry into the church and the means by which individuals appropriate God's gift of salvation in Christ has heretofore formed a constitutive element of the Restorationist way of being Christian.²

This commitment to believers' baptism as the rule of Christian practice can appeal to weighty precedents.³ Most directly it aligns Restorationist

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¹ An earlier version of this essay was presented to the Restoration Quarterly breakfast of the seventy-ninth Annual Bible Lectureship, Abilene Christian University, 25 February 1997. I am grateful to Richard Wright of Pitts Theological Library, Candler School of Theology, and to Stan Reid, pulpit minister, Granbury Church of Christ, for comment on the penultimate draft, but I am responsible for any errors.

² This phrase is adapted from John H. Leith's suggestive discussion of "the Presbyterian and Reformed way of being Christian"; see An Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community (Atlanta: John Knox, 1977), esp. 7, 22-31, and From Generation to Generation: The Renewal of the Church According to Its Own Theology and Practice (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990).

³ This essay takes up only the question of the proper subjects for baptism, leaving aside the not unimportant question of the mode of baptism.
churches with the "stepchildren of the Reformation"—with the biblicists among the sixteenth-century Radical Reformers—as well as with the English Baptists of the seventeenth century. As these Christians and their successors have often observed, the baptism of believers is the only rite of Christian initiation clearly attested in the NT. Less widely recognized, believers' baptism remained a common practice well into the fourth Christian century so that such prominent church leaders as Augustine, Chrysostom, Jerome, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil, and Ephraem the Syrian—all reared in committed Christian households—were baptized only as young adults. While Tertullian and Cyprian can be found defending the baptism of infants, not until the fifth-century Pelagian controversy is it appealed to as common practice.

In the sixteenth century, the moderate Catholic reformer Desiderius Erasmus rediscovered believers' baptism as apostolic practice and broadcast the rediscovery in the annotations to his widely used edition of the Greek NT; it was Erasmus's interpretation that was taken over and promoted so vigorously by the Radicals, whom Catholics and magisterial Protestants alike

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6 See Everett Ferguson, "Baptism," in Encyclopedia of Early Christianity 1.162. Ferguson has argued on the basis of funerary inscriptions that the practice of infant baptism arose as an exception to the norm of believers' baptism in cases of infant death ("Inscriptions and the Origin of Infant Baptism," Journal of Theological Studies n.s. 30 [1979]: 37–46). For an alternative case that infant baptism developed from the baptism of believing children, see David F. Wright, "The Origins of Infant Baptism—Child Believers’ Baptism?" Scottish Journal of Theology 40 (1990): 1–23. These two readings of the historical record are not mutually exclusive.
persecuted as “Rebaptizers” (Anabaptists), as Augustine had the Donatists. In more recent times, such varied authorities as Anglican evangelist John Wesley, Reformed theologian Karl Barth, Lutheran church historian Kurt Aland, Methodist minister William Willimon, evangelical author Charles Colson, and Roman Catholic liturgist Aidan Kavanaugh have recognized believers’ baptism as normative Christian practice. At various points across the confessional spectrum, we thus find concord with the Restoration’s affirmation of the importance of believers’ baptism.

It is possible, however, to emphasize the *importance* of baptism yet neglect its *significance*—to neglect what baptism signifies. Yet it is only what baptism signifies that warrants the importance that it has historically been accorded in the Restoration Movement. If Restorationist Christians neglect what baptism signifies, it will prove difficult to maintain for very long the importance of baptism in the life of our churches. This is especially the case in a milieu of increased openness to other traditions of belief, such as can be found in many Christian communions as we cross the threshold into the third millennium in which Christ has been named as Lord. While no Christian of good will would dispute that the engagement of confessional differences and the identification of common ground with believers outside our communion are worthy pursuits, entering into such interconfessional conversation with a lack of clarity about what baptism signifies may lead Restorationists to a

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8 For Wesley, see Henry H. Knight III, “The Significance of Baptism for the Christian Life: Wesley’s Pattern of Christian Initiation,” *Worship* 63 (1968): 133–42; for Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 4.4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1968); for Aland, *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963); for Willimon, *Remember Who You Are: Baptism, a Model for Christian Life* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1980), esp. 22–23, and *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), esp. 57, 60; for Colson, *The Body: Being Light in Darkness* (with Ellen Santilli Vaughan; Dallas: Word, 1992), 137; for Kavanaugh, *Made, Not Born* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), 118. While these authorities do not uniformly advocate the restriction of baptism to believers—and so cannot be said to have fully embraced the Anabaptist position on the question of the proper subjects of baptism—they have nonetheless recognized believers’ baptism as historically prior to infant baptism, or as theologically the norm from which they regard infant baptism as a more or less acceptable variation. A Restorationist must find striking Barth’s lament, “I am as little likely to live to see this [the replacement of the organ by a wind ensemble to encourage congregational singing] as I am to see a weekly Lord’s Supper (in the presence of the whole congregation) or the replacement of infant baptism by an act of penitence, prayer, and confession performed in common responsibility by both the congregation and the candidate” (*Letters, 1961–1968* [ed. Jurgen Fangmeier and Hinrich Stoevesandt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 307 [no. 293]).
premature surrender on this question. Such a surrender, however well intended, is ill advised. Renewed attention to the significance of baptism is called for if the importance of baptism is to be maintained with conviction.

A key resource for Christian reflection on the significance of baptism is provided in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Like all of Paul's letters to churches, Colossians was written to a community already formed through the acceptance of the gospel in conversion and baptism. Thus in Colossians, as everywhere in the Pauline corpus, baptism is mentioned only in the context of patterns of exhortation that might be termed "baptismal parenesis"; a Pauline letter does not introduce baptism to its hearers but appeals to them to live out the implications of their baptism.

Indeed, Colossians is structured around the most extensive baptismal parenesis in the Pauline letters, and the central section of the letter (2:6–4:6) constitutes the longest sustained reflection on baptism to be found in Scripture. With no pretense of exhausting the subject, the remainder of this essay draws from this baptismal parenesis three suggestions regarding what baptism signifies. These are offered in the hope that a recovery of the biblical theology and practice of baptism may further renewal of the covenantal life of churches committed to the Restorationist way of being the Christian community.

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9 This essay dissents from the mainline scholarly judgment, frequently assumed rather than argued, that Colossians is not a genuine letter of Paul but the posthumous composition of a (very bright) disciple; of all the cases made for Pauline pseudepigraphy, that for Colossians is among the weakest. Without fully arguing the case, we may note that (1) the very real stylistic differences between Colossians and the undisputed letters require only that the situation commended the adoption of a distinctive authorial persona (prosopopoeia, on which in relation to letters, see Luke Timothy Johnson, Letters to Paul's Delegates: 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus [Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1996], 6–7, 11–12), or that the circumstances of composition differed from those of the undisputed letters (cf. Micheal Prior, Paul the Letter-Writer and the Second Letter to Timothy [JSNTSup 23; Sheffield: JSOT, 1989]); (2) differences of theological emphasis between Colossians and (e.g.) Romans concerning baptism are no greater than (e.g.) those between Romans and Galatians concerning the Torah; and (3) the eschatology of Colossians, most explicit at 3:1–2, admirably preserves the characteristic Pauline tension between "already" and "not yet." See further Johnson, The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation (rev. ed.; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 271–73, 393–95; Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (AB 34b; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 114–26; Bonnie Bowman Thurston, Reading Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians: A Literary and Theological Commentary (Reading the New Testament; New York: Crossroad, 1995), 4–6.

10 For the concept of "baptismal parenesis," if not quite the term, see Nils Alstrup Dahl, Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1976), 19–20.
First, as the symbolic climax of the Colossians' conversion, baptism signifies the converts' transfer of allegiance to Jesus Christ as Lord. Recalling the recipients' conversion is a major interest of Paul in Colossians. Their initial acceptance of the gospel is first mentioned at the opening of the letter's introductory thanksgiving (1:6-7). The conversion is first given a definite characterization at the close of this thanksgiving, where Paul characterizes conversion as a transfer from one sphere of authority to another, "from the authority of darkness... into the reign of his beloved Son" (1:12-13). We shall see that as the letter proceeds the recollection of the baptismal pledge of allegiance to Christ remains a major concern.

The occasion for Paul's emphasis on recalling the baptismal pledge is provided by the circumstances in which the Colossian ekksesia came into existence and the situation in which it now finds itself. "The saints and faithful brothers in Christ in Colossae" (1:2) were brought to faith not by Paul himself but by Epaphras, a missionary associate of Paul ("our beloved fellow slave... a faithful servant of Christ," 1:7; "a slave of Christ Jesus," 4:12; "my fellow captive," Philem 23), and a native of the Lycus valley ("the one from among you," 4:12, as also Onesimus, 4:9). In Colossians, then, Paul addresses not a church of his own founding, but one established by a convert and missionary associate.

11 It cannot be certainly concluded that Epaphras was a native of Colossae itself. The language of 4:12 requires only that his origins be in some way common with that of the letter's recipients in central Turkey; and as 4:13 suggests that his missionary work also embraced Laodicea and Hierapolis, he may as easily have hailed from there. Epaphras was evidently one of those people who encountered Paul while traveling away from home and became associated with his mission; we meet several such in the narrative of Acts (e.g., Lydia the seller of purple cloth from Thyatira who had relocated to Philippi, where Paul converted her, Acts 16:1-15; Aquilla, the native of Pontus who with his wife Priscilla had relocated from Rome to Corinth, where their path crossed Paul's in part because of their common trade, Acts 18:1-3; and Apollos, the learned and gifted Alexandrian who is further instructed by Priscilla and Aquila in Ephesus and then succeeds Paul in Corinth, Acts 18:24-28). Perhaps business had initially brought Epaphras to Ephesus, where he heard Paul's gospel and was himself baptized. Then (it seems) he had returned home and shared his new faith with family members or business associates, establishing a house church in Colossae (and probably also Laodicea and Hierapolis, on the evidence of 4:13); he then rejoined Paul, working alongside him and eventually suffering imprisonment with him (Philem 23), whether in Ephesus, Caesarea, or (most likely) Rome. We find him in Paul's company when Colossians is written (4:12). For the mobility of the earliest Christians and contact between the churches, see most recently Michael B. Thompson, "The Holy Internet: Communication between Churches in the First Christian Generation," The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences (ed. Richard Bauckham; Grand Rapids and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 1998), 49-70.
The letter suggests that some time has elapsed since Epaphras’s founding of the Colossian assembly—enough for Epaphras to return from Colossae to rejoin Paul and inform him of the church established there, for Paul to add the Colossians to the group of churches for which he regularly prays, and for at least the pair of them to suffer confinement. Yet the founding of the church, thus also the conversion of the addressees, lies not too far in the past; Paul writes a fledgling church whose few members have never seen his face (2:1) and who must continue in the absence of their immediate founder since Epaphras is detained with Paul. The letter notes the concerns of both Epaphras and Paul for the church, expressed in their constant and agonized prayer for this fledgling Christian community (1:9–12; 2:1–3; 4:12–13).

Colossians is frequently interpreted as a polemical letter, the response to aberrant teaching current in the church or its environment. But this consensus is increasingly challenged; Walter Bujard’s stylistic analysis has furthered the recognition that the primary concern of the letter is not the engagement of heresy but the exhortation of the community. From the numerous reconstructions of “the Colossian heresy” in the secondary literature, we might scarcely guess that the explicitly polemical passages of the letter total only ten verses out of ninety-five, all of them found within chapter 2. To construe the letter in its entirety as polemical, these clear references to dangerous teaching have to be filled out with conclusions derived from a “mirror reading” of

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12 For Paul’s “care for the churches” expressed among other things in regular prayers of thanksgiving and petition on their behalf, in addition to Col 1:3, 9; 2:1–3, see 2 Cor 11:28–29; 1 Cor 1:4–9; Eph 1:15–23; 3:14–21; Phil 1:3–11; 1 Thess 1:2–3; 3:11–13; 5:23–24; 2 Thess 1:3–4; 2:13–17; 3:16; Philem 4–7.

13 For the Colossians as recent converts, see Thurston, Reading Colossians, 6.


passages that are not clearly polemical; the most optimistic verdict that can be pronounced over such adventurous interpretations is “not proven.”

We are on firmer ground to accept as polemical only the three passages in chapter 2 that explicitly warn about the influence of perhaps only a single aberrant teacher (namely vv. 4, 8, 16–23). These undoubtedly polemical passages occur within the framework of the recollection of the Colossians’ conversion; the polemical interest of the letter is subordinated to Paul’s pastoral interest in strengthening and nurturing this young community in its commitment to the allegiance to Christ that they have accepted in their conversion. We might refine Bujard’s assessment slightly and characterize Colossians as a letter of confirmation; that is, the letter reminds the Colossians of the significance of their conversion to Christ, in order to confirm them in the convictions and moral dispositions appropriate to their new faith.

The central appeal of the letter is found in 2:6–7: “As then you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in him, rooted and fortified in him and confirmed in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” Paul looks back to the Colossians’ conversion as an acceptance of the tradition that Christ Jesus is Lord, and he appeals to them to exhibit a manner of life that conforms to this confession. Paul appeals here to a characteristic formulation of the heart of his gospel. He elsewhere uses the acclamation “Jesus [Christ] is Lord” to summarize both the missionary proclamation by which he founded Christian communities (2 Cor 4:5) and the confession that his converts made in accepting his proclamation (Rom 10:9). This pledge of allegiance to Christ the Lord was doubtless affirmed in the context of baptism, for Paul reminds his Corinthian converts that they “were washed, . . . sanctified, . . . justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1 Cor 6:11). The simple sentence “Jesus is Lord”

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16 For the issues of method raised by such “mirror reading,” see Jerry Sumney, Identifying Paul’s Opponents: The Question of Method in 2 Corinthians (JSNTSup 40; Sheffield: JSOT, 1990).

17 The references are all in the indefinite singular, unlike the plurals of Gal 1:7; 5:12; 6:12–13; 2 Cor 2:17–3:1; 6:14; 10:12, 18; 11:5, 12–23; 12:11; and Phil 3:2, 18–19.

18 For an instructive portrait of Paul as pastor sketched on the basis of another letter to a church of recent origin, see Malherbe, Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosphic Tradition of Pastoral Care (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

19 Cf. Dahl’s remark, “Such letters as Colossians, Ephesians, and 1 Peter can accurately be called reminders” (Jesus in the Memory of the Early Church, 17). For a thorough consideration of Colossians in the light of philosophic parenesis, see Walter T. Wilson, The Hope of Glory: Education and Exhortation in the Epistle to the Colossians (NovTSup 88; Leiden/New York/Cologne: Brill, 1997).

20 On “the name of the Lord Jesus” in connection with baptism, see further Lars
is the presupposition for Paul’s frequent appeals to “the Lord Jesus Christ” whom Christians serve. In Phil 2:11, the acclamation occurs in a hymnic passage that shows that the church’s confession of Christ as Lord anticipates the acclamation that will usher in the new age, when every knee will bow, every tongue confess, and every sentient being in existence acknowledge Jesus Christ incarnate, crucified, and exalted as Sovereign over all creation.

In Colossians, as in the Pauline corpus generally, the lordship of Christ is universal; the Son of God’s love is sovereign over all that he has been instrumental in creating; thus he is identified as “first-born of all creation” (1:15), “pre-eminent among all things” (1:18), “the head of every rule and power” (2:10). But Christ’s lordship is also ecclesiastical, as it is in the church that it is presently exercised; he is “the head of the body, the church” (1:18). And the lordship of Christ is individual, as submission to Christ is expressed concretely in the individual response of obedience; this is implicit in all the specific ethical directives of 2:20–4:6, but the individual’s response of obedience is especially evident in the exhortation to slaves (“fearing the Lord,” 3:22; “work as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive . . . be slaves of the Lord Christ,” 3:23–24) and masters (“realize that you also have a Lord in heaven,” 4:1).

Richard Neuhaus captures the heart of the Pauline gospel for the contemporary church. The gospel announces that God has raised his crucified Son Jesus Christ and installed him as sovereign over all things, and the gospel offers its hearers the possibility of ordering our lives now under the sovereignty that will be manifest to all when Christ returns in glory. This demands the renunciation of other, lesser sovereignties that vie for the allegiance of people in the twenty-first century no less than the first. To be a minister of Christ, then, as Paul and Timothy and Epaphras were, is to be an ambassador of this disputed sovereignty, inviting others to turn from the reign of darkness in whatever form it is offered and to embrace the light of life under the reign of God’s Son. That transfer of allegiance to the service of Christ the Lord is fundamental to the significance of baptism.

Second, baptism signifies entry into the eschatological covenant people of God. The first explicit mention of baptism in Colossians comes at 2:11–13:

In [Christ] you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by hands, in the putting off of the body of flesh, in the circumcision of the Messiah;

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[you were] baptized with him in the [aforementioned] baptism, in which you were also raised through trust in the power of the God who raised him from among the dead. And you, dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, he made alive together with him, forgiving us all our trespasses.

The parallel drawn between baptism and circumcision, the rite of entry into the covenant with Abraham, is striking and suggestive for our understanding of what is transacted in Christian initiation. Baptism, while a deeply personal act, is not the solemnization of a private relationship between solitary individuals and their Creator. Rather, baptism is a public action by which an individual is granted membership in the new covenant people of God formed by the death, resurrection, and exaltation of Christ. Baptism is an action of communal and not merely individual significance. It marks our point of engagement with the God who through Christ has formed a new people, or who has rather renewed his people Israel.

The admission to the people of God granted in baptism is presented in Colossians as the work of God the Father himself; it is only God who can grant us admission to his people. The action of God in conversion, thus in baptism, is evident as early as 1:13: it is God who has “delivered us from the authority of darkness and transferred us to the reign of his beloved Son.” In 2:12, baptism is described as a “circumcision not performed with hands,” that is, one divinely accomplished. In the verses following, the actions that take place in baptism are presented as the actions of God the Father. Paul reminds the Colossians that in the act of baptism it is God who has “buried you together [with Christ] in baptism” and “raised you in Christ” (2:12; also 2:20; 3:1). God has “made you alive together with Christ” and “forgiven all the transgressions” (2:13); God has “blotted out the written accusation against us” and “removed it, affixing it to the cross” (2:14); God has “stripped bare the principalities and authorities” that formerly claimed the allegiance of

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22 The most consequential misinterpretation of this text is Ulrich Zwingli’s conclusion that baptism, like circumcision, is a sign of covenant membership suitable for infants (see Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 302-4). To go no further afield, the association of faith with baptism (v. 12, as also Gal 3:26) already suggests that baptism is reserved for those capable of trust.

23 The covenantal image, implicit in the references to a kingdom in which forgiveness of sins is made available (1:13–14; cf. Isa 40:1–11), to a peace won by God’s act of reconciliation in Jesus’ cross (1:20) and to circumcision itself, is explicit in the parallel to Col 1:18–23 found in Eph 2:11–22.

24 This admittedly free translation takes the passive voice as a circumlocution for divine action; for this use of the passive (as well as for dubious historical arguments therefrom concerning the Synoptic tradition), see Jeremias, *New Testament Theology: The Preaching of Jesus* (New York: Scribner’s, 1971), 9–14.
The worship of the gathered church is mentioned briefly in 3:16–17. Referred to in the context of moral exhortation, the worship of the church is to fit the worshiping community for a life that exhibits the virtues appropriate to the baptized enumerated in 3:12–15. Specifically the “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” of the Christian community are mentioned as instruments of teaching and admonition; they appear instrumental to Christians’ conduct of the whole of their life “in the name of the Lord Jesus” (v. 17), the name owned at baptism as we noted in 2:6. The church’s worship, then, renews and deepens the commitments made at baptism and equips the worshipers for a life that in word and deed expresses the disputed sovereignty of the Lord Christ.

This mention of the church’s worship forms a transition between the general exhortation to the church and the exhortation to Christians in particular stations of life. In 3:18–4:1, Paul addresses the members of the Colossian ekklesia according to the role they occupy in the households in which they live. This code of household duties has parallels in a wide range of Greco-Roman moral literature beginning with Aristotle. Since the work of Krister Stendahl and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, it has been common to treat such codes of duties in the NT as signaling a retreat from the radical egalitarian ethics of Paul himself, a retreat called in the second Christian generation by a church of rising social status, eager to accommodate to the hierarchical society around it. But in fact, in 1 Cor 7:17–24, in the context of an exhortation to husbands and wives, Paul outlines the quietistic, non-revolutionary household ethic that he says he teaches in all the churches: “Let each walk in that station in which the Lord has called him” (1 Cor 7:17, 24); he then mentions as examples of such stations circumcised and uncircumcised, master and slave—status pairs mentioned also in Col 3:11 (as in Gal 3:28 and 1 Cor 12:13). In Philemon, Paul does not offer general moral advice but advises a convert, a Christian master, in a concrete situation of difficulty with his newly converted slave; Paul appeals not for the release of the slave Onesimus but for his gentle treatment, as befits one who is now “more than a slave, a beloved brother” (Philem 16), and for the return of Onesimus to Paul to assist him in his “prison ministry.”

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32 The crux of the interpretation of Philemon is Paul’s refusal to state explicitly
Thus in the unquestioned letters as in Colossians, Paul is concerned to advise his converts how to live as wives and husbands, parents and children, slaves and masters who have been baptized into the sovereignty of Christ.

This essay has done no more than draw attention to some aspects of Paul’s letter to the Colossians that deserve closer attention if the significance of baptism is to be reclaimed. This is a task requiring much exegetical and theological work, both because the significance of baptism, presented in such a concentrated way in Colossians, is further disclosed in more diffuse fashion in numerous other texts of the NT and also because a full appreciation of the significance of baptism ultimately involves the whole substance of our faith.33 These reflections are offered in the conviction that faithfulness to the biblical witness requires the churches of the Restoration to cultivate an appreciation of baptism in our teaching ministry, in our baptismal practice, and indeed in our common life. It is by a rediscovery of the significance of baptism as a symbolic action expressing the whole of our faith and calling us to the life of covenanted obedience that Christians of the Restoration tradition may justly hope to be “renewed in knowledge according to the image of our creator,” together with all his saints.

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that for which he appeals (v. 21). Vv. 13–14 imply that the appeal was not for Onesimus’s release but for his return to assist Paul in his mission in confinement. For a suggestive reconsideration of the interpretation of Philemon, see Craig S. Wansink, Chained in Christ: The Experience and Rhetoric of Paul’s Imprisonments (JSNTSup 130; Sheffield: JSOT, 1996), 147–99.