Should Evangelical Churches Re-baptize Catholics?
An Irenic Proposal
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A Nineteenth Century Issue Resurfaces
When this question was debated in the nineteenth century, Protestant America had been set on edge by waves of European Catholic immigrants to the cities of the Atlantic seaboard. Until 1840, outside of regions such as Maryland and Louisiana, many American Protestants had little or no direct contact with Roman Catholics; this rapidly changed with the influx of Irish and European immigrants. In light of these developments, American Protestant leaders had to engage a vexing question: “On what terms might persons who had been baptized, reared, catechized and confirmed into Catholicism be received into Protestant churches?”

Today we return to this question because of two profound demographic shifts: a) Catholic immigration (now chiefly from Central and South America) and b) a Catholic migration including (but not confined to) Hispanics, into our churches. In cities such as Houston, Chicago, and Atlanta former Catholics now gladly associate themselves by the thousands with evangelical Protestant churches. These new allegiances involve vastly more people than the often-highlighted reverse process: the “going home to Rome” phenomenon. The crux of the question is: “Should re-affiliated Catholics be required to be re-baptized?” How one resolves this issue is determined by the way one answers collateral questions.

Two Underlying Questions to Be Faced

1. What place does Baptism occupy on our theological landscape? Few evangelical Christians will want to insist that it is a primary doctrine as is the divinity of the man, Jesus of Nazareth (1 John 5.1), the existence of God in three persons (2 Cor. 13.14), or the principle that salvation is received by appropriating faith (John 1.12). Baptism is more often considered as belonging to a second rank of doctrines. We do not mean to denigrate baptism, but only to acknowledge that since salvation comes by hearing with faith (Rom. 10.17, Gal. 3.2) it is conceivable both to pass from this world in a state of salvation without it (Luke 23.43) and, conversely, to receive baptism and still be unrenewed (Acts 8.22,23). While baptism is obligatory for those who would be called Christians (Acts 2.38), we cannot demonstrate conclusively that every believer in the N.T. period had been baptized. When Paul can recall baptizing only a handful of the Corinthian believers (from a group large enough to sub-divide itself four ways!), we are left to wonder who (if not Paul) baptized the remainder. Evidently, baptizing was not the highest of Paul’s priorities (1 Cor. 1.13-17). Baptism is important, but not of preeminent importance (1 Cor. 15.3-5). Differences of Christian conviction about baptism are the legacy of its having this secondary status.

2. A second question is that of what determines whether any particular baptism ought to be reckoned as valid. Here, there are four factors to be considered.

First, the most common criterion for a baptism’s validity is whether it has been administered in the name of the Trinity (Matt. 28.19), or to put it differently – in the name of Jesus (Acts 8.16; Gal. 3.22). Yet, if taken as a last word, this approach would only invalidate baptisms administered by non-Trinitarians (such as Jehovah’s Witnesses, or Mormons).

Second, some will insist that a further test of baptismal validity is that of mode, i.e. the question of whether a baptism was administered by immersion, pouring or sprinkling (with the latter two regarded with suspicion by proponents of the first). Yet, if we grant the primacy of the Trinitarian test (above), it is wise for us to consider that the mode of baptism is only able to render a particular
baptism ‘irregular’ as distinguished from ‘regular’. This charitable conclusion will follow if – while granting that the majority of N.T. baptisms were associated with sources of water which made immersion or pouring possible – we also take on board the fact that not all NT accounts imply or require this (e.g. Acts 2:41; 9.18; 10.45;16.33). Allowing that immersion was the prevailing or even preferred mode in the Apostolic and post-Apostolic church, it is still evident that variations on immersion were rapidly introduced to accommodate circumstances requiring them. Immersionists should be aware that this ancient variation is reflected even in various streams of the Anabaptist and Baptist movements. Thus, Trinitarian baptisms, even if carried out in what might be considered to be an ‘irregular’ mode, ought to be accepted as valid. (This charitable assessment places those who make it under no obligation to themselves employ any practice which they consider to be irregular).

Third, a credobaptist (one insisting that profession precede baptism) will be saying ‘hold on!’ Accepting Trinitarian baptism, conducted in different modes, is one thing; but wouldn’t such an approach oblige one to accept infant baptism as valid too? Doing that would draw the paedobaptist not just into an ‘irregularity’ of practice but into what he would consider ‘error’. There may not be any elbow room for the credobaptist on this question; yet consider this. Evangelical ordinances/sacraments function at two levels. At one level, when joined with the Word, they display the blessings of Christ and the gospel which are to be appropriated by faith. As surely as water cleanses from pollution, so the sacrifice of Christ for us – received in faith – cleanses us from sin. Infant baptism serves this ‘display’ purpose adequately. At a second level, evangelical ordinances/sacraments confirm the blessings of the gospel to those who receive them in faith. In this second sense (of confirming), it needs to be acknowledged that baptism, applied to the infant, functions ‘prospectively’ (i.e. with an eye to future developments).

A charitable credobaptist might be able to bring himself to recognize the validity of an ‘irregular’ infant baptism, administered under Catholic auspices, considered as a display of gospel promises. But he would also insist that it was not valid considered as a confirmation or seal because that benefit is contingent on a still-future appropriation by faith. Now in taking such a stance, the conscientious credobaptist occupies nearly identical ground as does the evangelical paedobaptist who is also looking for that individual, already baptized under Catholic auspices, to make a credible profession of faith in Christ. In doing so, the paedobaptist would reckon that the baptism the Catholic originally received as ‘sign’ or ‘display’ had also become a ‘confirmation’ or ‘seal’. The difference between credobaptist and paedobaptist approaches is, on this analysis, quite a limited one.

But fourth, someone will say, “Surely baptisms can also be reckoned invalid because of their association with doctrines or practices we reckon to be flawed?” This seems to be a sticking point for evangelical Protestants who – even if otherwise inclined to a policy of baptismal ‘generosity’ – balk at accepting as valid baptisms associated with ideas of sacramental regeneration or of the removal of original sin. We should be honest and admit that it is not only over Catholic doctrines that we face this problem. There is a host of questions raised by clergy scandals of various kinds (from which no denomination I am aware of has been exempt). Yet, if we assert that baptism can be invalidated because of errors of doctrine and life in Trinitarian churches which have administered it, we are painted into a corner. Whose sensitivities on such matters – yours? mine? someone else’s?— will be determinative in deciding which baptisms are valid? Here again, a spirit of generosity provides the best way forward. And this is so in light of a final relevant question, which is...

**Whose Ceremony is Baptism?**

This is the supreme question. If we are right on this, we will be right on the larger issue too. In quite a different context in which one ‘branch’ of the church (the Donatist) had assailed the validity of the baptisms of the older church from which it stood apart, Augustine (354-430) insisted:
in the matter of baptism, we have to consider not who he is that gives (i.e. administers) it, but what it is that he gives; not who he is that receives, but what it is that he receives…When baptism is administered in the words of the gospel, however great be the perverseness of the minister or recipient, the sacrament itself is holy on his account who the sacrament is…

Seen in this light, ‘irregular’ baptisms, if administered in the name of the Trinity, are valid. It is a good thing! Consider how many of our baptisms could be deemed ‘irregular’. If an ‘ideal’ baptism could be considered to be the one in which the moment of believing corresponds perfectly in time with the moment of baptism (the two being halves of one whole), then not many of our spiritual biographies perfectly match this ‘ideal’. We have accommodated ourselves both to considerable lapses of time between believing and being baptized (among credobaptists) and to similar lapses of time between being baptized and believing (among paedobaptists). As a result, we have in many cases only approximations of the baptismal ideal. Still, our two evangelical understandings do succeed in preserving the importance of both believing in Jesus Christ and being baptized. In the end, since baptism belongs to Jesus Christ who received it (Matt. 3.13-17) and authorized it (Matt. 28.19, 20), since the church Jesus founded affirms “one baptism” (Eph. 4.5) and since our own personal spiritual biographies regarding Christ and baptism are non-uniform, we ought to extend the charity we grant to one another to persons who received Catholic baptism. At their professions of faith, we should welcome them unreservedly into our churches.

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**For Further Reading**
Augustine, *On Baptism* IV.16.18
C, K. Barrett, *Church, Ministry and Sacraments in the N.T.* (Eerdmans: 1985), chap. 3
Elizabeth Dias, “The Latino Reformation” in *Time* (April 15, 2013)
Didache chap. 7,
Scot McKnight and Hauna Ondrey, *Finding Faith, Losing Faith* (Baylor: 2008), chap. 3
David F. Wright, ed. *Baptism: Three Views* (IVP: 2009)