

## The Lord Is Come

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

The Lord is come; the Heav'ns proclaim  
His birth; the nations learn His Name;  
An unknown star directs the road  
Of eastern sages to their God.

All ye bright Armies of the Skies,  
Go, worship where the Saviour lies;  
Angels and Kings before Him bow,  
Those gods on high, and gods below.

Let idols totter to the ground,  
And their own worshippers confound;  
But Judah shout, but Zion sing,  
And Earth confess her sov'reign King.

## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### **Erecting the Right Fences in the Right Places, Part Eight: Baptism as a Secondary Doctrine**

Kevin T. Bauder

In *Finding the Right Hills to Die On*, Gavin Ortlund develops a theory of doctrinal triage. In this theory, second-rank doctrines are not fundamental to the gospel, but they are important to some level of Christian fellowship. To illustrate how second-rank doctrines work, Ortlund addresses three areas of doctrinal controversy. The first one is baptism, a topic over which Christians widely disagree.

His discussion contains much that is helpful. Ortlund rightly notes that differences over baptism cannot be reduced to one simple issue. Instead, baptism involves a bundle of questions that get addressed differently by various Christians. Different answers to these questions result in whole varieties of positions on baptism.

Ortlund also argues that, in spite of these differences, baptism is important, and the questions cannot be avoided. He is right. Either churches will baptize or they won't. If they do, they will either baptize infants or they won't. They will either restrict baptism to immersion or they won't. Believers who have committed themselves to definite views on baptism cannot usually settle contentedly in churches that deny those views.

According to Ortlund, baptism is obligatory for Christians. To use his language, being baptized is a matter of obedience to Christ. It plays an important role in the church's life as a people of God. Baptism is a sign and seal of the gospel itself (103–104). Depending upon what Ortlund means by baptism being a "seal," I find myself agreeing with most of what he says here (though I disagree with his remark that baptism symbolizes the washing away of sins). Baptism is sufficiently important that it does affect some levels of Christian fellowship. Specifically, it must not be ignored for church membership.

I also partially agree with Ortlund that baptism is not a doctrine on which the gospel is won or lost (104). He is right insofar as salvation does not depend upon getting baptized. As in the case of Cornelius (Acts 10–11), the New Testament clearly presents salvation coming before baptism.



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And yet, sometimes the gospel *can be and is* lost over the matter of baptism. Ortlund notes in passing that some groups, claiming to be Christian, make baptism a necessary or even sufficient condition of salvation. Still, he never draws out the implications of this observation, preferring to limit his discussion mainly to Reformed understandings of baptism.

Nevertheless, the matter cannot be overlooked. In Roman Catholicism, baptism works *ex opera operato* (we might say *automatically*) to wash away the guilt of original and personal sins, to confer the grace of justification, and to place an indelible mark upon the soul. This form of baptismal regeneration constitutes a clear denial that justification is applied through faith alone. Thus, the Catholic understanding of baptism denies the gospel.

In Stone-Campbell (Church of Christ) soteriology, salvation is not applied until an individual is baptized. A professor in a Stone-Campbell college once explained to me that if someone trusted Christ for salvation but died in a car crash on the way to baptism, then that person would go straight to hell. While some Campbellites may have softened this view, it remains near the heart of Stone-Campbell preaching. It, too, constitutes a denial of the gospel.

In other words, sometimes errors about baptism are first-level, fundamental errors. They place the people who hold them outside the circle of gospel fellowship. Bible believers should not extend any level of Christian fellowship to advocates of Roman Catholic or Stone-Campbell soteriology.

Ortlund also lists Lutherans among those who affirm baptismal regeneration, but he fails to note that their situation is different. Conservative Lutherans (such as Missouri Synod Lutherans) believe that salvation is applied through faith alone, but they also affirm that baptized infants are justified. How can they have it both ways? The answer is that they see infants as capable of faith. This faith is dormant in that the infant is not aware of it (like our faith while we are asleep), but it is nonetheless real. This dormant faith can be created in the infant through baptism.

In other words, the Lutheran view does not teach that baptism is either a necessary or a sufficient means of salvation. Granted, it is an odd view. Menno Simons is supposed to have wryly asked a Lutheran how many people the apostles baptized in their sleep. Furthermore, the Lutheran view sometimes communicates false assurance to those who were baptized as infants. In spite of these problems, this view does not deny that justification is applied through faith alone. While I judge that this Lutheran view is badly in error, it is consistent with the bare message of the gospel. Consequently, some level of Christian fellowship is possible with such Lutherans. I personally cherish the warmth of Christian friendship with professors at the Free Lutheran seminary across Medicine Lake from the Baptist seminary where I teach.

In the Reformed view, baptism identifies an individual with the believing community. It is administered to the infant children of church members, not because they are thought to be saved but because they are seen as part of the community. While this view confuses Old Testament Israel with the New Testament Church, it is miles away from denying anything that is essential to the gospel. I could not join a church with members who held this view, but I am willing joyfully to extend multiple other levels of fellowship to them.

In sum, the crucial issue with baptism is not so much its subjects or mode (though those questions do matter) as its meaning. Baptism can be understood in some ways that deny the gospel. These denials elevate some errors about baptism to the level of fundamental, first-rank errors. They break all Christian fellowship.

Other errors are of a lesser nature, limiting Christian fellowship at some levels but not others. As with all differences over non-fundamental doctrines, the question here is not whether Christian fellowship is possible. The question is which levels of fellowship are affected by the differences. Where the gospel is not at stake, doctrinal disagreement rarely makes fellowship an all-or-nothing proposition.



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This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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