

## The Possibility of Baptismal Baptist Theology: Retrieving Irenaeus for Contemporary Baptists

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**Abstract:** *This article delves into the intricate relationship between believer's baptism and the interpretation of the Bible within Baptist theology. Acknowledging that this connection is more intricate than a straightforward progression from biblical interpretation to church practice, the study draws upon the insights of early Church Father Irenaeus of Lyons to elaborate on the profound significance of baptism as a guiding framework for Christian faith and Bible interpretation. Irenaeus's perspective highlights that baptism provides not only an ontological foundation but also a conceptual framework for comprehending the Christian faith. This perspective resonates with Baptists, whose emphasis on regenerate church membership and believer's baptism aligns with Irenaeus's focus on the ontological reality of baptism and its shaping influence on Christian thought. By adopting Irenaeus's approach, Baptists can expand their understanding of baptism from a micro-church practice to a macro-theological category, enriching their theological outlook and the interpretive lens through which they engage with Scripture. This approach does not require creedal authority but enables Baptists to embrace their distinctive theological identity while deepening their understanding of the ontological underpinnings of faith.*

**Key Words:** *baptism, Baptist theology, dogmatics, dogmatic theology, Irenaeus of Lyons, St. Irenaeus*

Believer's baptism defines Baptists both in name and in practice. While there are additional distinctive marks of Baptist churches, it would be difficult to overstate the significance of believer's baptism in defining this tradition. At the same time, in many contemporary Baptist texts, believer's baptism is relegated to a mere church ordinance. Baptists treat baptism as a biblical and ecclesial necessity central in the life of the local church. Believer's baptism is what Baptists do, but Baptists have not often developed its impact on the way they think.

If the relationship between baptism and Baptist thought<sup>1</sup> is considered at all, it is oft treated in a linear manner, moving from a right reading of the Bible to church practice. Baptists of the past and present read the Bible to hear its intent and conclude that the church should baptize only the regenerate. Without question, Baptists should move from Bible interpretation to drawing conclusions of church practice. However, the interplay between baptism and Bible interpretation can be more complex than just a linear movement from the Bible to church practice—for any denomination. Christians can move from their baptism and baptismal confession back to the Bible as a guide for biblical interpretation. At a basic level, most Christians receive their thoughts on church practice and Bible interpretation from their experiences in and with the church itself and interpret the Bible according to that received tradition. Baptism and Bible interpretation have a multidirectional relationship, wherein Christians move from the Bible to their views of baptism but, also, can move from baptism to clarity in Christian thinking and Bible interpretation.

Recognition of the multidirectional relationship raises the question—can there be a Baptist way of thinking and interpreting the Bible that emerges from the practice of believer's baptism? For some, this may seem to teeter on the edge of an unhelpful theological innovation (as some have accused Baptists of before). However, this question has deep moorings in the history of the church. In fact, a close tie between baptism and Christian thought was quite common and even defining for the early church Fathers.<sup>2</sup> This common thread provides grounding for contemporary Baptists to consider the relationship between our defining practice and the framework of our theological thought patterns.<sup>3</sup> Alt-

<sup>1</sup> By “Baptist thought” or “Christian thought” one could also say “theology” or “doctrine.” “Theology” and “doctrine,” though, are terms with a plethora of definitions. As such, I have chosen to use the more general “Christian thought” in this essay to refer to the conceptual frameworks in the mind of Christians.

<sup>2</sup> For someone who maps some of this trajectory and connection, see Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 36–41..

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say I am arguing that all the early church fathers practiced believer's baptism. However, there are legitimate claims that the some of them did. Steven A. McKinion, “Baptism in the Patristic Writings,” in *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn Wright (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007). See also Everett Ferguson, *Bap-*

though we might look at multiple early church fathers to explore this connection, Irenaeus of Lyons offers to contemporary Baptists a well-defined connection between baptism and Christian thinking making him a fruitful interlocutor. The intersection between baptism and Bible interpretation plays a significant role in the whole of his theology. Further, his views on this point influence later church leaders.<sup>4</sup>

I will argue that, for Irenaeus, baptism provides the ontological and conceptual framework for the Christian faith and Bible interpretation, and this framework can be appropriated for contemporary Baptists. I will argue for this thesis in two parts. First, I will outline the three key components of Irenaeus's thought regarding baptism and Christian thinking/Bible interpretation. (1) Baptism is an ontological reality. (2) The conceptual categories emerging from baptism create a framework through which we understand the Christian faith and interpret the Scripture. (3) Baptism is a macro-theological category, not a micro-church practice. Second, I will argue that, for Baptists, believer's baptism is an ontological reality and thus agrees with Irenaeus's first component. As a result, Baptists can develop a framework of thought and treat baptism as a macro-theological category in a way akin to Irenaeus's second and third components. I will conclude with a brief proposal for such a baptismal framework.<sup>5</sup>

### Retrieving Irenaeus on a Baptismal Way of Thinking

In the introduction to *The Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching* and scat-

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*tism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 856–57.

<sup>4</sup> According to John Behr, Irenaeus's proposal was "the most significant transition in early Christianity. Thereafter, Christians were committed to a common body of Scripture, including the apostolic writings ... the canon of truth, apostolic tradition and succession ... in a unity of faith" (*The Way to Nicaea* [Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001], 111).

<sup>5</sup> I should note at the outset that the question of Irenaeus's own view of baptismal practice is up for some debate. See Peter-Ben Smit, "The Reception of the Truth at Baptism and the Church as Epistemological Principle in the Work of Irenaeus of Lyons," *Ecclesiology* 7.3 (2011): 354–73. This essay does not intend to engage in that discussion. Rather, I argue regardless of Irenaeus's own views of the relationship between baptism and regeneration, his way of thinking can be appropriated in a Baptist context. I am not arguing that Irenaeus himself appropriated his own thought in the exact way I will propose, which would be anachronistic.

tered across *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus provides three clear commitments on the relationship between baptism and Christian thought. First, baptism is an actual participation in the reality or ontology of God in Christ. It is no mere sign or symbol, but rather, in baptism we have life in God through union with Christ by means of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Christians participate in God through union with Christ. Second, the conceptual categories emerging from the ontological reality of Christian baptism create a Trinitarian/Christological framework through which we understand the Christian faith and interpret Scripture. Third, baptism is a macro-theological category, not a micro-church practice. The first two commitments combine to cause the third. Irenaeus builds his framework for the Christian faith and interpreting the Bible out of the faith received in Christian baptism.

Before exploring these three components, we must bear in mind that in Irenaeus's way of thinking the ontological and conceptual components are inseparable. I am only dividing them in this essay for heuristic value and to highlight the unity and coherence of Irenaeus's proposal. All conceptual, articulate<sup>6</sup> categories of Christian thinking and Bible interpretation emerge from the ontological reality of God in Christ and his church. In this way, ontology has logical primacy over verbal categories of our knowledge. At the same time, in the lived experiences of Christians, the ontological reality and the articulate framework cannot be bifurcated. Christians always experience reality and our verbal framework simultaneously. The ontological reality and conceptual categories are essentially inseparable—two sides of the same coin.

First, baptism is an actual participation in the reality of God in Christ—ontologically.<sup>7</sup> For Irenaeus reality, or Truth, plays a significant role in his understanding of the Christian faith and its Scripture. In the opening paragraph of *Demonstration*, Irenaeus explains he intends "to demonstrate by means of a summary, the preaching of the truth so as to

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<sup>6</sup> By "articulate" I mean the words we use in our theological thinking and discourse.

<sup>7</sup> T. F. Torrance defines ontology as "the doctrine of being or of what really exists, the objective reality to which our thought refers and which gives it meaning" (*Belief in Science and in Christian Life: The Relevance of Michael Polanyi's Thought for Christian Faith and Life* [Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998], 141). This sense is consistent with my usage in this paper. In this case, that what "really exists" is the Triune God and the hypostatic union of the Jesus Christ Son of God, and then, the church's participation in *this* God in *this* Christ.

strengthen your faith.”<sup>8</sup> For Irenaeus, “the truth” preached is not solely propositional but rather is itself living. This living, textual truth brings life to those who understand it in faith. Irenaeus’s goal of exposition of the “things of God” is “so that ... it will bear your own salvation like fruit.”<sup>9</sup> This personal, textual truth brings life through salvation, which blossoms in the life of the believer bearing “salvation like fruit.”

Irenaeus concludes his preface with an appeal to the rule or canon of faith, which is anchored in God *in se*. He writes, “We must keep to the rule of faith unswervingly, and perform the commandments believing in God and fearing him, for he is Lord, and loving him, for he is Father.”<sup>10</sup> In this rule of faith, Irenaeus intends something far more pervasive than a mere conceptual framework—both because of the object of faith, and our response. In terms of Christian response, as we keep the rule of faith, we also perform the commandments of God. As Irenaeus explains, “Action comes by faith.”<sup>11</sup> The faith that produces the obedient action in the believer is moored in the ontological reality (or “truth”) of God who is the object of our faith. He writes, “The truth brings about faith, for faith is established upon things truly real, that we may believe what really is, as it is, and believing what really is, as it is, we may always keep our conviction firm.”<sup>12</sup> This sentence provides the premise upon which the rest of Irenaeus’s argument depends. Christians cultivate faith through engaging with the Scripture wherein we know the God who really is and seek to conform our believing to him as he really is. In other words, Christians begin and end with God in himself and continually conform our minds and actions to this true God, which involves words and concepts. This real and true God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As Irenaeus continues, he makes a direct connection between God who really is and the ontological reality of Christian Baptism. He explains that this faith, brought about by the truth of God, “exhorts us to remember what we have received in baptism.”<sup>13</sup> He defines this baptism as “for the remission of sins, in the name of God the Father, and in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, [who was] incarnate, and died,

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus Saint Bishop of Lyon, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. John Behr (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003). *Demonstration*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Demonstration*, 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Demonstration*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Demonstration*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> *Demonstration*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> *Demonstration*, 3.

and was raised, and in the Holy Spirit of God.”<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus outlines the reality of our baptism and its confession. He makes this connection by referring to Matt 28:19 and Jesus’s command to baptize “in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus clarifies this biblical framework of baptism in the Name by adding “incarnate, died and was raised.” In doing so, he brings Matt 28:19 and Rom 6:1–11 together by asserting the Trinitarian, Christological reality of Christian baptism.<sup>16</sup> This baptism in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, is “the seal of eternal life and rebirth unto God ... that we may ... be sons ... of the eternal and everlasting God.”<sup>17</sup> As Christians are baptized into Christ we are changed in being—moving from death to “eternal life” as we are given “rebirth unto God.” According to Irenaeus, in salvation Christians participate in the Triune life in Christ.<sup>18</sup> Christians hold unswervingly to the rule of faith by remembering our baptism into the divine life through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. As Christians participate in Christ, baptism affects our being, and as such, it requires the ontological reality of God in Christ and a Christian’s rebirth in him. In this way, Christian baptism is real—the church’s real participation in a real God.

When referring to baptism “for the remission of sins,” Irenaeus does not clarify whether he intends that the church’s practice of H<sub>2</sub>O water baptism is saving or whether our baptism in the Water of the Holy Spirit (John 7:39) saves. However, two components of Irenaeus’s proposal are clear and relevant for Baptist appropriation of his thought. First, baptism requires faith. Everett Ferguson claims, “Irenaeus strongly asserted

<sup>14</sup> *Demonstration*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> In *Against Heresies* he makes the Great Commission connection explicit. He writes, “For [God] promised that in the last times He would pour Him [the Spirit] upon [His] servants and handmaids, that they might prophesy; wherefore He did also descend upon the Son of God, made the Son of man, becoming accustomed in fellowship with him to dwell in the human race, to rest with human beings, and to dwell in the workmanship of God, working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their old habits into the newness of Christ” (*Against Heresies* 3.17.1).

<sup>16</sup> Irenaeus does not make a direct connection to either of these biblical passages. Of course, he never cites biblical passages because such citations were not the practice of his time.

<sup>17</sup> *Demonstration*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus explains the same idea in his exposition of Romans 5–6 in *Against Heresies* 3.16.9.

the necessity of faith for salvation.”<sup>19</sup> In *Demonstration*, as already noted Irenaeus provides a close tie between faith/rule of faith and baptism. In *Against Heresies* he makes a similar claim that “Human beings can be saved in no other way ... except by believing.”<sup>20</sup> Second, any view where the candidates are not regenerate would be foreign to Irenaeus’s proposal. If Irenaeus intends the church’s practice in baptism at all, that sacrament must be observed in conjunction with our regeneration in Christ. Either the baptismal candidates are regenerated by faith through the H<sub>2</sub>O waters of the church’s practice and the water of the Spirit simultaneously, or the baptismal candidates are regenerate by the Spirit in Christ prior to their baptism in the H<sub>2</sub>O waters of the church. It would be incoherent to Irenaeus’s proposal for baptismal candidates to be regenerated after their baptism in the H<sub>2</sub>O waters of the church. In this way, baptism requires the ontological reality of the Christian’s regeneration in Christ which occurs through faith.

Second, the conceptual categories emerging from Christian baptism create a Trinitarian/Christological framework through which one understands the Christian faith and interprets the Scripture. Irenaeus develops this argument in *Demonstration* and in *Against Heresies*. As noted above, Irenaeus functions with an inner coherence of ontology and conceptual frameworks, and they cannot be separated. To keep this point at the forefront, I have opted to refer to this as “onto-conceptual” to reinforce the essential connection between the Christian way of thinking and that which is “truly real.”

In *Demonstration*, Irenaeus provides a direct presentation of the conceptual categories which emerge from God *in se* and provide the thought-framework of the Christian faith. He does not move beyond Trinitarian/Christological ontology but rather proposes that the conceptual categories of the Christian faith are the articulation of Trinitarian/Christological ontology of our baptism. This claim harkens back to his admonition at the beginning of the introductory section that the faith, brought about by the truth, “exhorts us to remember that we have received baptism.”<sup>21</sup> In short, Irenaeus’s proposes that the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ in whom the Triune God reveals himself should provide the framework for Christian thought and Bible interpretation. Faith in God through Christ occurs conceptually in three articles which accord ontologically with the three persons of the Trinity.

<sup>19</sup> Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church*, 304.

<sup>20</sup> *Against Heresies* 4.2.7.

<sup>21</sup> *Demonstration*, 3.

*Article 1*: “God, the Father, uncreated, uncontainable, invisible, one God, the Creator of all.”<sup>22</sup>

*Article 2*: “the Word of God, the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was revealed by the prophets according to the character of their prophecy and according of the nature of the economies of the Father, by whom all things were made, and who, in the last times, to recapitulate all things, became a man amongst men, visible and palpable, in order to abolish death, to demonstrate life and to effect communion between God and man.”<sup>23</sup>

*Article 3*: “the Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied and the patriarchs learnt the things of God and the righteousness, and who, in the last times, was poured out in a new fashion upon the human race renewing man, throughout the world, to God.”<sup>24</sup>

Irenaeus organizes the articulate, verbal aspect of the Christian faith to correspond with the structure of God’s being and the Christian gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and his Son has affected “communion between God and man.” Here he expands the baptismal summary he introduced in paragraph 3. He punctuates this expanded introduction to the verbal articles of the Christian faith and ties them inseparably to baptism. He states, “For this reason the baptism of our regeneration takes place through these articles.”<sup>25</sup> In Christian baptism we receive both personal renewal in being and an articulate framework of thought which accords with that renewal.

For some contemporary ears, Irenaeus’s summary of the Christian faith’s articles may sound like embellishing the creeds. Irenaeus predates the creeds, but he is rehearsing the faith once for all delivered to the saints that would later be inscribed in the ecumenical creeds.<sup>26</sup> John Behr notes that Irenaeus’s aim in these creedal-like statements “is not ... to give fixed, and abstract statements of Christian doctrine.”<sup>27</sup> Irenaeus does not defend creedalism. He is not protecting a particular set of codified, authoritative words. Rather, he defends a particular Christian way of thinking that accords with the being of God and our salvation in him.

<sup>22</sup> *Demonstration*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Demonstration*, 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Demonstration*, 6.

<sup>25</sup> *Demonstration*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> For a similar thought, see Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 66.

<sup>27</sup> Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 35.

He does so, not for the sake of the creed, but rather as an exposition of the faith into which we are baptized. He makes the point in plain writing, “For this reason the baptism of our regeneration takes place through these articles.”<sup>28</sup> Our real baptism into a real God and affecting real regeneration occurs with a conceptual framework or “articles” corresponding to the being of God into whom we are baptized.

In *Against Heresies* Irenaeus introduces a different way of considering the onto-conceptual framework of the faith into which we are baptized by using the analogy of a mosaic. He refutes the heretics who “disregard the order and connection of the Scriptures.”<sup>29</sup> The heretics ignore the inherent conceptual framework of the Bible. He describes the Scripture as “a beautiful image of a king ... constructed by a skillful artist out of precious jewels.”<sup>30</sup> The false teachers have rearranged “the gems, and so fit them together to make them into the form of a dog or a fox.”<sup>31</sup> Frances Young explains that Irenaeus’s appeal to “the King’s face” can be equated to “the Christological reference” of the text. This picture of the King is the onto-conceptual framework of the Christian faith—Christ, the King.<sup>32</sup> One cannot rightly interpret the Scripture without beholding the King through the textual jewels.

Later, Irenaeus makes a direct tie between his mosaic analogy and baptism. He begins the section by using Homer’s writings. He pulls well-known quotations and rearranges them to create a narrative structure foreign to Homer’s own works. He moves from his Homeric example back to his analogy of a jeweled mosaic, wherein baptism delivered to us the picture which allows Christians to properly locate to constituent pieces of the Scripture. He explains, “anyone who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables from the Scriptures.”<sup>33</sup> In baptism, Christians have received a way of thinking necessary to properly interpret the Bible, and as long as we hold fast to the faith of our baptism, we will read the Bible rightly and reject any heretical teaching which scrambles the textual image of our King. He writes, “For if he

<sup>28</sup> *Demonstration*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> *Against Heresies* 1.8.1.

<sup>30</sup> *Against Heresies* 1.8.1.

<sup>31</sup> *Against Heresies* 1.8.1.

<sup>32</sup> Frances M. Young notes that Irenaeus’s appeal to “the King’s face” can be equated to “the Christological reference” of the text (*Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002], 20).

<sup>33</sup> *Against Heresies* 1.9.4.

recognizes the jewels, he will not accept the fox for the image of the king. He will restore each one of the passages to its proper order and, having fit it into the body of truth, he will lay bare their fabrication and show that it is without support”<sup>34</sup> The faith received and professed in baptism is the framework of Bible interpretation and Christian thinking.

As Irenaeus continues, he follows a nearly identical pattern of logic as in the introduction to *Demonstration*. First, he asserts that the faith received in baptism provides the framework (or *hypothesis*) to understand the Bible according to its intent, and then, he articulates that faith. He writes that the church’s faith accords with three articles corresponding to the three Persons of the Trinity. This faith begins with belief “in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven, and earth, and the sea and all things that are in them”<sup>35</sup> followed by belief “in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who became incarnate for our salvation;”<sup>36</sup> and finally belief “in the Holy Spirit, who proclaimed through the prophets the dispensations of God.”<sup>37</sup> From there Irenaeus outlines precisely what the Spirit proclaimed through the prophets:

the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the ascension into heaven in the flesh of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his future [manifestation] from heaven in the glory of the Father ... to raise up anew all flesh of the human race, in order that to Christ Jesus, our Lord and God, and Saviour, and King, according to the will of the Father, “every knee should bow ... and that every tongue should confess to him.”<sup>38</sup>

John Behr remarks of this section that “Though not formally called a ‘canon of truth,’ this is the fullest such statement given by Irenaeus.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> *Against Heresies* 1.9.4.

<sup>35</sup> *Against Heresies* 1.10.1.

<sup>36</sup> *Against Heresies* 1.10.1.

<sup>37</sup> *Against Heresies* 1.10.1.

<sup>38</sup> *Against Heresies* 1.10.1.

<sup>39</sup> John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity*, reprint ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 79. See also “Just as a cento of Homeric verses taken out of their context and strung together to produce a new story will not fool anyone who actually knows Homer, so someone who has received at baptism the ‘measuring rod of truth’ will be able to recognize as scriptural the names, phrases and parables usurped by the heretics, but will not accept as true the blasphemous tales they have woven from them (*AH* I.9.5). As the reference

Similar to *Demonstration*, in *Against Heresies* Irenaeus argues for an onto-conceptual framework of the Christian faith received in baptism which accords to the being of God.<sup>40</sup>

Third, baptism is a macro-theological category, not a micro-church practice. The resultant conclusion of points one and two is that baptism can play a major role in Christian thinking and Bible interpretation. For Irenaeus, the significance of the faith of our baptism and our reception of it extends far beyond a moment where Christians enter the baptismal waters in the church. Rather baptism involves participation in God himself and affects the very being of Christians as we confess the Christian faith—the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. As explained above, in our baptism we hold fast to the canon of truth/rule of faith. This rule of faith, then, provides the proper framework for Christian thought and Bible interpretation. J. N. D. Kelly explains that by canon of truth Irenaeus meant “a condensed summary, fluid in its wording but fixed in content, setting out the key-points of the Christian revelation in the form of a rule.”<sup>41</sup> This “condensed summary” creates for Christians a framework to properly read the Bible according to its nature and purposes. According to Behr, “For Irenaeus, the canon of truth is the embodiment or crystallization of the coherence of Scripture, read as speaking of the Christ who is revealed in the Gospel, the apostolic preaching of Christ ‘according to the Scripture.’”<sup>42</sup> Behr appeals to the gospel of Christ as a way of explaining Irenaeus’s understanding of the canon of truth. Christians receive the gospel through the preaching of the church according to the Scripture, confess the gospel in our baptism, and then,

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to baptism suggests, the ‘measuring rod of truth’ is related to a creed, but the relationship is to the content of the creed, rather than to a particular credal formula. It does not appear to have had a fixed form, but to have been adaptable to the polemical context in which it was invoked. Its fundamental features are that there is but one God, who created everything from nothing by his Word, and who is the Father of Jesus and the author of the whole history of salvation. In the *Demonstration* Irenaeus speaks of a *κανών* (the Greek word is transliterated in the Armenian) of faith rather than of truth, and tells us that this faith is arranged under the three headings by which baptism is completed—faith in the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Dem 3)” (Denis Minns OP, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* [London: T&T Clark, 2010], 12).

<sup>40</sup> Behr notes that it’s likely *Demonstration* preceded *Against Heresies* (*The Way to Nicaea*, 112).

<sup>41</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 37.

<sup>42</sup> Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 36.

interpret the Scripture according to its own gospel grid.

As Christians implement this way of Bible interpretation, they break-through to the reality of God—who reveals himself through his Word. Irenaeus instructs that “If anyone ... reads Scripture with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ... For Christ is the treasure which was hid in the field, that is, in this world ... but the treasure hidden in the Scripture is Christ since he was pointed out by means of types and parables.”<sup>43</sup> As we hold fast to the Rule of Faith, we behold the face of Christ the King as a treasure hidden in the field of the Scripture. We do so by seeing him in the smaller components in “types and parables.” T. F. Torrance, commenting on *Against Heresies* 4.20.7, expounds that Irenaeus’s ruled reading of the Scripture “means that interpretation must penetrate through the text of the Scriptures into the actual pattern of the saving events as proclaimed in the Old and New Testaments and discern how various passages and statements refer to and reveal that inner sequence and consequence in the operations of God.”<sup>44</sup> Torrance continues, as we read the Bible with this expectation to penetrate to the reality of God in Christ it “takes us deep into the Gospel, into the coordinated work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and into the interconnection between redemption and creation running throughout all history from the very beginning to the final consummation.”<sup>45</sup> As we read the Bible according the Rule of Faith received in our baptism, the gospel serves as the framework for Christian thinking and Bible interpretation, and we are drawn again to the reality of our union with God in Christ. As Christians interpret the Bible this way, we do so “in accordance with their own *system of truth*, that is, according to the rule of truth or faith already developed by the Apostles themselves who gave us the Scriptures.”<sup>46</sup> For Irenaeus, reading the Bible through our baptismal confession means reading according to its nature and intent.

### Appropriating Irenaeus for a Baptismal Baptist Theology

Irenaeus proposes baptism as the ontological reality of our participation in God and the conceptual Trinitarian/Christological framework of Christian thought. This proposal can be appropriated by contemporary

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<sup>43</sup> *Against Heresies* 4.26.1.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *Divine Meaning: Studies in Patristic Hermeneutics* (New York: T&T Clark, 1995), 119.

<sup>45</sup> Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 119.

<sup>46</sup> Torrance, *Divine Meaning*, 128.

Baptists. Baptists and Irenaeus share a core conviction about ontological reality in baptism. When we begin with ontology as a point of agreement, we can appropriate the conceptual framework proffered by Irenaeus as well. In other words, Irenaeus and Baptists agree in some sense on this first commitment outlined above, and so we can follow his lead in developing commitments two and three.

To explain this further, I will briefly justify the claim that all Baptists share a bedrock and defining conviction about the importance of ontology in baptism and church membership. Second, I will follow Irenaeus's logic to propose key components to expand our understanding of baptism from a micro-church practice to a macro-theological category. In doing so, Baptists can cultivate a way of thinking inseparable from the lived experiences we already share in our churches week-by-week.

First, Baptists share a core conviction of ontological reality of baptism. Baptists are a wily folk, and even agreeing on our defining distinctives is contested and difficult. Although there are legitimate reasons to include multiple defining marks of Baptist theology,<sup>47</sup> by and large, Baptists agree that the twin commitments of regenerate church membership and believer's baptism play a foundational role in defining our tradition.<sup>48</sup> John Hammett asserts, "Central to the idea of the vision of the church is the insistence that the church must be composed of believers only."<sup>49</sup> Gregg Allison follows suit defining the church as "the people of God who have been saved through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and have been incorporated into his body through baptism with the Holy Spirit."<sup>50</sup> Stanley Grenz couples this logic of regenerate church membership with believer's baptism by calling baptism "the logical outworking of ... regenerate church membership."<sup>51</sup> Thus, we can consider

<sup>47</sup> E.g., William H. Brackney's six "genetic traits" of Baptist theology (*A Genetic History of Baptist Thought: With Special Reference to Baptists in Britain and North America* [Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004], 527–38).

<sup>48</sup> These two twin pillars map loosely onto Stephen Holmes's two poles of Baptist theology. Stephen R. Holmes, *Baptist Theology. Doing Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2012), 5–6.

<sup>49</sup> John S. Hammett, *Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches: A Contemporary Ecclesiology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019), 91.

<sup>50</sup> Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 29.

<sup>51</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 711–12. John Hammett appeals to Grenz's logic, as well (*Biblical Foundations for Baptist Churches*, 109).

believer's baptism and regenerate church membership as inherently connected. Hammett explains, "They form part of the believer's church tradition, and believer's baptism promotes and preserves that type of church."<sup>52</sup>

Both believer's baptism and regenerate church membership focus on the church's being. While Baptists stake claims about the mode and meaning of baptism, our core conviction lies in the being of the baptismal subject. Our unity emerges from a commitment to the *being* of the church and the subject of believer's baptism. For Baptists, in all aspects of ecclesiology it matters who you are. To be baptized, one must first have already confessed faith and been raised to new life in Christ. In the words of the *Abstract of Principles* baptism is "a sign of his fellowship with the death and resurrection of Christ."<sup>53</sup> Baptismal subjects participate in God in Christ. The baptism of believers serves as the gateway into the regenerate church. The baptism of our being into Christ is inseparable from participating in the church's practice, and so, perhaps more than anything else, believer's baptism is about an ontological reality.<sup>54</sup> In this way, Baptists are aligned with Irenaeus and his concern to anchor the Christian faith in a God who is "truly real" and in a baptism of rebirth in Christ in fellowship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Thus, because Baptists share an inseparable connection between baptism and ontology, we can retrieve Irenaeus's argument for an ontological conceptual framework received and professed in baptism. While this idea may seem new or unfamiliar to some contemporary Baptists, the idea that baptism and a way of thinking go hand in hand is not new in Baptist history. For example, Thomas Helwys in his 1610 confession explains, "The Holy Baptism is given unto these in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, which hear, believe, and with peni-

<sup>52</sup> John S. Hammett, *40 Questions About Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2015), 104.

<sup>53</sup> *Abstract of Principles*, XV.

<sup>54</sup> I suspect some readers may desire more specificity about the relationship between the practice of H<sub>2</sub>O water baptism in the church, and Spirit baptism in regeneration. This desire is valid. However, my point here is rather simple—for Baptists our baptism of regeneration by the Spirit and our participation in the church's practice baptism should be held closely together. In Baptist faith and practice, they inherently do, even if there may some divergence on the proper timing of baptism in relation to conversion. The inseparable connection between the church's baptismal practice and our baptism of regeneration fits well with the inseparability of the two in the Scripture, as well.

tent heart receive the doctrines of the Holy Gospel.”<sup>55</sup> For Helwys and his followers, in baptism we have received “the doctrines of the Holy Gospel.” Baptism not only accords with the being of God and our being in Christ, but also, an articulate framework of thought—“the doctrines of the Holy Gospel.” More recently, Mark Dever claimed, “Baptism is itself a summary of our faith.”<sup>56</sup> For Dever, baptism’s value extends beyond the moment of its practice into a way thinking as it summarizes the Christian faith. The idea of conceptual categories received in baptism is not altogether new in Baptist history or in contemporary Baptist scholarship, and yet, there remains a chance to develop its centrality more fully.

For Baptists to appropriate Irenaeus’s logic, we must grant primacy to the categories of being in our ecclesial practices and in the framework of our thought. In doing so, baptism moves from being a micro-church practice to functioning as a macro-theological category. Then, the God we confess in baptism and the Christ in whom we are regenerate shape core articulate categories for our theology.

In a baptismal Baptist theology, the conceptual framework of thought emerges from the ontological reality of our baptism. As far as doctrinal affirmation, all Baptists confess the Triune God and the Incarnate Son and consistently give proper articulation of those as stand-alone doctrines. However, most Baptists anchor the coherence of Scripture in something other than (though, not opposed to) the baptismal confession. For some Baptists, the biblical idea of covenant forms the core framework of our theology and Bible interpretation. Sometimes this takes the form of proper covenantalism as expressed in the *Second London Baptist Confession* or more recently Stephen Wellum and Peter Gentry’s proposal for Progressive Covenantalism which focuses on the historic covenants of the Bible as the shaping conceptual framework of their thought.<sup>57</sup> Still others see dispensations, in various ways, as the

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<sup>55</sup> *A Short Confession of Faith* (1610), article 29 (*Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 2nd ed., ed. William L. Lumpkin and Bill J. Leonard (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2011)).

<sup>56</sup> Mark E. Dever, “Baptism in the Context of the Local Church,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn Wright (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), 329.

<sup>57</sup> For example, one might consider Stephen Wellum and Peter Gentry’s proposal for Progressive Covenantalism. Peter John Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God’s Kingdom through God’s Covenants: A Concise Biblical Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

framing concern for Bible interpretation and Christian thought.<sup>58</sup> These models offer much to Baptists of many stripes and should be commended for their commitment to the text of Scripture and desire to edify the church. Yet there remains another option for Baptist beyond Covenantalism or Dispensationalism. Should Baptists follow Irenaeus’s model, our articulate, onto-conceptual framework would emerge from our baptism in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and our dying and rising with Christ. In this way, the Trinity and Christology play a shaping role in every aspect of Baptist thought and Bible interpretation, as God in Christ acts in growing his church into maturity

My purpose in this essay has not been to provide an entire proposal of a baptismal Baptist theology, but rather to justify the possibility for Baptists to follow Irenaeus’s logic because of our shared conviction about ontology. That being said, let me proffer two concluding thoughts regarding baptism as a macro-theological category: (1) the Bible presents baptism in this light and (2) this way of thinking does not require credal authority.

First, the Bible presents baptism as a macro-theological category for Bible interpretation. In brief, this big picture emerges from the combination of Matt 28:18–20, 1 Cor 10:2, and 1 Pet 3:21.<sup>59</sup> In Matt 28:19, Jesus invokes the Old Testament category of “the Name” in association with our baptismal confession. “The Name” looms large from God’s naming of himself in Exod 3:14 as YHWH and is woven throughout the Old Testament. Here in Matt 28, the Name, YHWH of the Old Testament, gains definition as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit into whom we are baptized. In 1 Cor 10:2, Paul associates baptism with the Exodus. The Exodus, too, looms over the Old Testament as a paradigm for the salvation of God’s people. When Paul brings the Exodus and baptism together, he introduces another way in which baptism plays a significant role in Bible interpretation. Finally, in 1 Pet 3:21, Peter says that our baptism corresponds to Noah and the flood. Thus, when these key texts from the New Testament associate baptism with such significant textual components of the Old Testament, baptism begins to emerge as a mac-

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<sup>58</sup> For example, one might consider Craig Blaising’s and Darrell Bock’s proposal for Progressive Dispensationalism. Craig A. Blaising, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993).

<sup>59</sup> For a more robust exposition of the role of Baptism in relationship to the interpretative categories for the whole Bible, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973).



ro-theological category for Bible interpretation, and less something to be relegated as a micro-church practice.

Second, while Irenaeus's proposal may be associated with later creedalism, it does not require creedal authority. Some Baptists may bristle at any notion of the rule of faith on the grounds that it has been associated with an ecclesial authority outside of the context of the local church, which would transgress our shared commitments on church governances. This concern holds muster. In time, Irenaeus's somewhat flexible rule or canon took solid form as it was codified in the Magisterium. Those creeds do function authoritatively for Christians of other traditions. However, for a Baptist appeal to the rule of faith need not require us to import foreign authority structures into our polity. Rather, we can follow in Irenaeus's footsteps. While creeds may be a useful tool as a trustworthy articulation of the faith of our baptism, the church's codified language need not rule over us. Rather, "Christ ... clothed in his gospel" according to the Scripture rules his church.<sup>60</sup> He is the King of our confession and whom we behold in the Scripture. The words we use that accord with his being may vary some depending on the context.

### Conclusion

For Irenaeus, baptism provides the ontological and conceptual framework for the Christian faith and Bible interpretation, and this framework can be appropriated for contemporary Baptists. For Irenaeus, (1) baptism involves ontological participation in God in Christ. (2) The conceptual categories emerging from baptism create a framework through which we understand the Christian faith and interpret the Scripture. (3) Baptism is a macro-theological category, not a micro-church practice. Because Baptists share a commitment to ontology and baptism by way of our Baptist distinctives of believer's baptism and regenerate church membership, we can appropriate Irenaeus's logic to create a baptismal Baptist theology. In doing so, Baptists have leeway to lean into baptism as a macro-category, not a micro-ordinance. Let's be brazenly Baptist in the best kind of way. Let our defining ordinance define not only our ecclesial commitments (believers' baptism and regenerate church membership), but also our way of thinking.

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<sup>60</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 3.2.6.