

Pastoral Reflections on Mennonite and Pentecostal Sacramental Spirituality

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As we approach the five-hundredth anniversary of the Reformation, Christians of all tribes will be reflecting on its implications for the future of the Christian movement. It is not a stretch to suggest that the Reformation was about the nature and efficacy of sacraments. The second point of Luther's Ninety-five Thesis refers specifically to the sacrament of penance.¹ In rejecting the medieval sacrament of penance Martin Luther challenged the mediatorial offices of Pope and priests, and set into motion a theological scandal that survives five-hundred years onward. Even the Protestants could not find unity in sacramental theology. Luther and Zwingli could not find agreement on the meaning of the Eucharist. The Radical Reformers rejected the magisterial Reformation of Luther and Calvin, along with essential elements of their reformed dogma. Thomas Finger has rightly suggested that the Radical Reformers protested Catholic sacramentalism and the priestly offices of Rome because the Roman Catholic Church "claimed that it possessed Christ and controlled his presence" through the Mass which, according to the reformers was an illegitimate instrument of ecclesiastical and sociopolitical power.² This theological scandal has deeply wounded the church which fails to demonstrate the love of Christ

¹ Speaking of "*Poenitentiam agite*," that is "do penance" in Thesis #1, Luther explained, "This word cannot be understood to mean sacramental penance, i.e., confession and satisfaction, which is administered by the priests." Martin Luther, *Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences: October 31, 1517*. Electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 1996).

² Thomas N. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 185.

as the “perfect bond of unity” (Colossians 3:14).³ The very sacraments which are meant to regenerate, nourish, heal, and cleanse the church are instead objects of controversy and schism. I am not suggesting the Reformation was an unnecessary course correction in the Church’s wilderness wandering. But I do suggest that if we are to cross into the Promised Land the various tribes of God’s people must put aside the grumblings of former generations and seek common understandings of the Faith. It is in that spirit that I wish to discuss the sacraments in Anabaptist and Pentecostal spirituality. Specifically, are these rites essential to Christian spirituality? If so, how does God mediate grace through Christ and Spirit as believers participate in these rites of worship? Finally, does a minimalist interpretation of sacramental rites lead to a decline of practice in corporate worship? In discussing these questions, this paper will draw primarily from the works of Thomas Finger (representing the Mennonites) and French Arrington⁴ (representing the Church of God). I will also reflect on the papers and dialogue of the 2015 Believer’s Baptism Consultation that convened in Kingston, Jamaica.⁵

First we must review some definitions in an effort to properly interpret our diverse theological tongues. In previous work I have defined *sacrament* as “a sacred act of worship blessed by Christ the High Priest through which the worshiper encounters the Spirit of grace.”⁶ The *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Church of God* refer to these acts of worship as

³ Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible*, © The Lockman Foundation 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995. Used by permission.

⁴ French Arrington, *Christian Doctrine: A Pentecostal Perspective, 3 Volumes* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 1992, 1993, 1994). Arrington’s work is a popular theology, not an academic theology. To date there is not an academic systematic theology written by a Church of God theologian. Even so, Arrington’s work sufficiently represents the Pentecostal perspective of the Church of God (Cleveland, TN) and has been widely used in ministerial education as a supplemental reading in the Ministerial Internship Program.

⁵ The Believer’s Baptism Consultation met on January 7-11, 2015 in Kingston, Jamaica. The papers were published in *The Ecumenical Review 67.3: A Dialogue on Believer’s Baptism* (October 2015).

⁶ Daniel Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments: Encountering God at the Altar – Revised Edition* (DanielTomberlin.net, 2015), 69.

“ordinances of the church.”⁷ French Arrington explains that “ordinances are visible signs of the saving work of Jesus Christ . . . not mere ceremony . . . but a means of real communion with God and of strengthening grace.”⁸ Throughout the body of literature of the Church of God the words sacrament and ordinance are often used as synonyms.

In the *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* the preferred term for these “ceremonies” is *sign* which is an act of God and a human action. This suggests that worship ceremonies signify a convergence of God’s grace and human obedience.⁹ Actually, Pentecostals would likely prefer the term *signs* in reference to water baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and foot-washing because it is reminiscent of the long ending of Mark in which Jesus says, “signs will accompany those who have believed” (Mark 16:17). The Marcan signs – tongues, healing, and exorcism – are associated with the descent of the Spirit and the power of the resurrected Christ being demonstrated in the life of believers. Likewise, water baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and foot-washing are *signs* of God’s redemptive acts in which the people of God participate. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper we will generally use the terms *sacrament* and *sign* synonymously.

The Radical Reformers rejected the Catholic doctrine of *ex opere operata* (from the work worked) in favor of *ex opere operantis* (from the work of the doer). The emphasis moves from the efficacy of priestly mediation to the efficacy of ecclesial participation. Following the Lutheran emphasis on justification *sola fide* (by faith alone), the Radical Reformers insisted that the reception of divine grace is conditioned by human freewill. The synergism of divine grace and human freewill is represented in the writing of Melchior Hofmann (1530):

⁷ *Church of God General Assembly Minutes* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 2014), 30.

⁸ Arrington, v. 3, 208.

⁹ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald, 1995), Kindle Location 693.

It [baptism] is the sign of the covenant of God, *instituted solely for the old, the mature, the rational, who can receive, assimilate, and understand* the teaching and preaching of the Lord, and not for the immature, uncomprehending, and unreasonable, who cannot receive, learn, or understand the teaching of the apostolic emissaries: such as immature children. . .

When now the bride of the Lord Jesus Christ *has given herself* over to the Bridegroom in baptism, which is the sign of the covenant, and *has betrothed herself* and *yielded herself to him of her own free will* and has thus in very truth accepted him and *taken him unto herself*, thereupon the Bridegroom and exalted Lord Christ Jesus comes and by his hand – the apostolic emissaries are the hand – takes bread (just as a bridegroom takes a ring or a piece of gold) and gives himself to his bride with bread (just as the bridegroom gives himself to his bride with the ring) and takes also the chalice with the wine and gives to his bride with the same his true bodily blood, so that just as the bride eats physical bread in her mouth and drinks the wine, so also through belief in the Lord Jesus Christ she has physically received and eaten the noble Bridegroom with his blood in such a way that the Bridegroom and the outpouring of his blood is [one] with hers – and the broken and crucified Christ Jesus. She [is] in him and, again, he is in her, and they together are thus one body, one flesh, one spirit, and one passion, as bridegroom and bride (*emphasis mine*).¹⁰

Even a casual reading of this brief selection suggests a tendency in Anabaptist theology towards semi-pelagianism, a charge to which Finger admits. He has written that early Anabaptist theologians “sometimes advocate human responsibility to the border of works righteousness.”¹¹ Hoffman’s anthropology suggested that only the flesh suffered from original sin while the human spirit “remained righteous and yearned for God.”¹² Even so, humans are in need of a double justification. The first justification occurs when Christ is accepted by faith. In Roman Catholic spirituality original sin is remedied in infant baptism, mediated by the priest, through which the infant is born again through the agency of the Holy Spirit. In Anabaptist spirituality original sin is remedied by faith in Christ through the agency of the Holy Spirit in a believer who possesses rational accountability. The first justification frees the human will to allow for the second justification which enables good deeds towards perfection.¹³ Stuart Murray has written,

¹⁰ Melchoir Hoffman, “The Ordinance of God” in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*, George H. Williams and Angel Mergal, editors (Louisville: Westminster, 1957) 192-194.

¹¹ Finger, 268.

¹² Finger, 485.

¹³ Finger, 126-127.

Anabaptists equated “baptism in the Spirit” with conversion, but expected more to happen experientially than did the Reformers. The radicals were not satisfied with forensic ideas of grace, typified by the legal terminology of “justification by faith.” Rather, they saw grace as “the inner light that directed a life of righteousness.”¹⁴

It is because of this radical conversion experience that Anabaptists “hesitate in identifying the water rite directly with the new birth experience.”¹⁵

This early Anabaptist theology is familiar to Pentecostals. French Arrington explains,

God takes the initiative to save us. His initiative is evident in the redemptive work of Christ and in the Holy Spirit’s drawing us to the Father . . . Pentecostal theology . . . has maintained *a balance between the divine initiative and human responsibility* in salvation. God saves, but we are not saved until we accept God’s gift of salvation. Or to put it another way, we have *God-given freedom* to either accept or reject God’s offer of salvation (emphasis mine).¹⁶

Salvation is received by “saving faith” in which “repentance is a believing and trusting experience.” Saving faith involves a human response to God that includes knowledge (intellectual grasp), belief in the adequacy of Christ, “commitment of our total personality,” and obedience to the gospel. Consequently to “saving faith” the believer is justified, that is, declared righteous and “restored to a right relationship with God.” This radical reorientation of humanity is called the new birth which is “an inward transformation” that “changes the nature and disposition of the believer.” New birth also signifies adoption by which believers are “granted the intimate privileges of being members of the household of faith.” Hoffman’s second justification corresponds to the Pentecostal second work of grace – sanctification. Sanctification enables “a disciplined life” in which “the grace of God *is allowed* to continue working in our lives” so that we are “brought into conformity with Christ.” To *allow* the continued work of divine grace emphasizes human freedom and responsibility. Even so, Arrington is careful to

¹⁴ Stuart Murray, “Anabaptism as a Charismatic Movement: Diverse Phenomena in Early Decades,” Internet: <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/book/export/html/173>

¹⁵ Alfred Neufeld, “Anabaptist-Mennonite Perspectives on Baptism,” *The Ecumenical Review* 67.3 (October 2015) 415.

¹⁶ Arrington, v. 2, 171

suggest that “saving faith” is not a *human work*, but a *divine gift* of prevenient grace. Also, like the Anabaptists, Arrington understands human sinfulness to be remedied by “saving faith” in Christ rather than water baptism as a means of salvific grace.¹⁷ In fact, Arrington posits three baptisms. The first is that which “incorporates the believer into the church, Christ’s body, and that is administered by the Holy Spirit at conversion.” This speaks to the new birth, or regeneration, in which the Spirit effects “a complete inward renewal.” This is distinct from the second and third – water baptism and Spirit baptism. The three baptisms are not concomitant, nor necessarily sequential in that Spirit baptism may precede water baptism. Arrington denies any salvific efficacy to water baptism. He declares, “Water can never purify us of sin. Only the renewing of the Holy Spirit can cleanse us from sin.”¹⁸

So then, what is the significance of water baptism as a rite of Christian initiation as sign, ordinance, or sacrament? Anabaptists and Pentecostals will agree that inward faith produces outward works. In other words, to receive Christ by faith means that the believer must demonstrate obedience to Christ by presenting oneself for water baptism which is a visible sign of invisible grace. Likewise, Anabaptists and Pentecostals share a common rationale for submitting to water baptism – the Bible commands it. Anabaptists and Pentecostals share a common tendency to approach water baptism (and other sacraments) in minimalist ways by denying salvific efficacy to these signs of grace. The consequence of a minimalist sacramental theology is demonstrated in a dearth of theological reflection and ecclesial practice. Finger has written that sacramental themes are neglected in current Anabaptist theology.¹⁹ This is rather remarkable when one considers the role of baptismal theology in the life and faith of early generations of Radical Reformers. Many Pentecostals have similar lack of interest in sacramental

¹⁷ Arrington, v. 2, 193ff.

¹⁸ Arrington, v. 2, 210-213.

¹⁹ Finger, 158, 160.

theological reflection. Church of God theologians who have written about salvation rarely include a discussion of water baptism as a sacramental sign of initiation.²⁰ French Arrington's *Christian Doctrine* devotes less than ten pages (of about seven hundred in three volumes) to a discussion of the sacraments.²¹ This lack of interest is further demonstrated in practice. According to the most recent records Church of God ministers have reported 233,776 conversions in the United States and 38,568 water baptisms.²² If these reports can be taken at face value, then many converts are not being baptized even though the Church of God Declaration of Faith states that "all who repent should be baptized."²³ It appears that a minimalist sacramental theology reduces the sacramental signs to antiquated, nonessential rites. It seems that Radical Reformers and renewalist Pentecostals inadvertently limit the means of grace. Some practice "closed communion" and a *defacto* "closed baptism" (restricting baptism to persons of accountable age). The renewalists who insist on the extra-sacramental work of the Spirit seek to limit access to the signs of grace that are minimalist symbols. In other words, we seem to be saying, "These sacramental signs don't really mean much, but you can't have them." Or, it may be that by restricting sacraments to believers we imply an incipient sacramental meaning. By insisting on the ecclesial aspect of sacraments – faith and community – are we also insisting that the sacramental rite itself is meaningful in human redemption?

²⁰ See: Donald N. Bowdle, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 1972) and R. Hollis Gause, *Living in the Spirit: The Way of Salvation* (Cleveland, TN: Pathway Press, 1980). Both books were widely read within the Church of God. Bowdle never mentions water baptism and Gause mentions water baptism only to distinguish it from Spirit-baptism.

²¹ Arrington, v. 3, 208-215. Exceptions are Chris E. W. Green, *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of the Lord's Supper* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2012) and Daniel Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments: Encountering God at the Altar* (2010, 2015).

²² Sharon Adkins, Church of God International Offices, Department of Business and Records, Cleveland, TN. Response from an email inquiry on September 23, 2016. Statistics are for 2015.

²³ *Church of God General Assembly Minutes*, 21.

I have suggested that Pentecostals should revision the sacraments using Spirit-baptism as a theological paradigm. The sacraments might be understood as Spirit-anointed sacred rites in which the Holy Spirit rests paraphysically upon the sacramental elements.

The elements of the sacraments are material substances which the Spirit touches. In the observance of the sacraments, believers touch the elements and are touched by the Spirit. The elements of the sacraments are mediating gifts of grace because of the presence of the Spirit of grace.²⁴

The waters of baptism are anointed by the Spirit and thereby mediate divine presence and grace. Instead of insisting on the *extra*-sacramental work of the Spirit, believers may receive divine grace through the *para*-sacramental work of the Spirit. If water baptism is indeed a para-sacramental work of the Spirit there is no need to insist on a theological distinction between conversion-initiation and water baptism even if there is a temporal distinction. Instead, water baptism may be understood as the seal of the Spirit which signifies the pledge of the fullness of God.

Water baptism signifies the gift of the Holy Spirit as a redemptive seal “given as a pledge of our inheritance” (Ephesians 1:13-14) and anticipates baptism in the Holy Spirit – the “fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:16-19). Mark offers a paradigm for understanding the relationship of water baptism with the gift of the Spirit. He begins and ends his gospel with water baptism and the descent of the Spirit. When Jesus was baptized he came up out of the water and the Spirit descended upon him. The Spirit was signified by a dove and the utterance of the Father (Mark 1:9-11). After the resurrection, Jesus commissioned his disciples to go into the world, preach the gospel, and baptize believers. The accompanying signs of baptism include exorcism, tongues-speech, and healing – all charismatic gifts associated with the Holy Spirit (Mark 16:15-18). The association of the Spirit with water baptism, and accompanying signs, is not unique to Mark.²⁵

Peter proclaimed, “be baptized . . . and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

Water baptism signifies repentance and anticipates Spirit-baptism which is manifested in signs of wind, fire, tongues-speech, healing, and prophetic speech (Acts 2:1-4; 4:31; 9:17-19; 19:6). Paul wrote that believers have been “baptized into Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:3) and have received “the

²⁴ Tomberlin, 67.

²⁵ Daniel Tomberlin, “Believers’ Baptism in the Pentecostal Tradition,” *The Ecumenical Review* 67.3 (October 2015) 432.

Spirit of life” who dwells in us and bears witness that we are the children of God. The corresponding sign of baptism is the utterance “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:2, 14-16). Paul associates baptism with signs of the Spirit which include diverse *charismata* (1 Corinthians 12:8-10). There is a rich tradition throughout the early church, and Pentecostalism, that associates manifestation of diverse *charismata* with water baptism and the gift of the Spirit.²⁶ Pentecostals throughout the world associate water baptism with exorcism and healing.²⁷ Water baptism is more than ritual cleansing; it is a charismatic encounter in the Spirit.

The Church of God and Anabaptists share a common concern in rejecting the practice of infant baptism. The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* states, “Baptism is for those who are of the *age of accountability* and who *freely request* baptism on the basis of *their response* to Jesus Christ in faith” (emphasis mine).²⁸ Thomas Finger has written that infant baptism is a poor expression of church life which requires mutual commitment, that is, “interplay between individual freedom and corporate identity central to ecclesial existence.” He writes that infant baptism symbolizes “inscription into hierarchical structures at the expense of participation flowing from conscious commitment.”²⁹ French Arrington has written that “the conditions for baptism in water are the hearing of the Word of God, repentance from sin, and faith in Jesus Christ.” Further, he asserts that “none of these responses could be made by infants” and “there is no direct evidence in the New Testament that baptism of households included small children.” Therefore, the Church of God does “not accept the practice of infant baptism.”³⁰

²⁶ Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments*, 139-140. I should add that the effort by Anabaptists and Pentecostals to insist that Paul is not referring to water baptism (Romans 6) will not bear the scrutiny of the apostolic or patristic witnesses. It is a 16th century reading that is superimposed over 1st century practice.

²⁷ Idler, Ellen I., editor, *Religion as a Social Determinant of Public Health* (Oxford, 2014), 97-102.

²⁸ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Kindle Location 693.

²⁹ Finger, 178-179.

³⁰ Arrington, v. 3, 210-211.

The assertion that there is no evidence of the baptism of small children in the New Testament can be easily challenged by suggesting that there is no evidence that household baptisms *excluded* small children.³¹ In fact, Jesus' words seem to suggest otherwise: "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all" (Mark 10:15; cf. Matthew 18:3). If adults must enter the kingdom of God with a child-like faith, then children should likewise be able to enter the kingdom of God with a child-like faith. To insist on an age of accountability suggests that children must have an adult-like faith. I am reminded of the dialogue at the Believer's Baptism Consultation in which a Baptist presenter insisted that "children are partial participants in the Kingdom of God."³² I responded, "You seem to be suggesting that children are sub-human." I remain concerned that insistence on rational belief excludes child-like faith. If water baptism is indeed the sacramental sign of initiation into the faith (Mark 16:16), then the words of Jesus – "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14; cf. Matthew 19:14) – would indeed apply to water baptism.

Also, I have reservations about the Mennonite and Church of God perspectives on freewill and rational accountability, even though I cannot embrace Calvin's view of predestination and election. While I hold to human autonomy, I am compelled to ask if any human is sufficiently free from the corrupting spiritual powers/systems of darkness to enable free choice (outside of prevenient grace). Furthermore, if we can acknowledge the *corrupting world* powers/systems; then can we acknowledge the *saving ecclesial* powers/systems as a form of prevenient grace? In other words, is there room in our understanding of ecclesial life to allow for

³¹Finger acknowledges, "While New Testament evidence strongly supports believer's baptism, remember that it does not address children. Accordingly, even though New Testament metaphors (except possibly washing) cannot really stretch to include infants, it is still important to ask whether broad ecclesiological considerations might" (178).

³²Neville G. Callam, at Believer's Baptism Consultation in Kingston, Jamaica, 2015.

the efficacious faith of the believing community on behalf of one who cannot make a conscious, rational confession of faith? Can the faith of parents presenting a child for baptism be a form of prevenient grace within the saving ecclesial powers/systems of Christ's body?

I once engaged a conversation with a Catholic brother about our diverse views of the sacraments. I insisted that a sacrament was valid only when received in faith. That led to a discussion about water baptism. I insisted on believers' baptism and suggested that infant baptism was not salvific because an infant could not express faith. My brother asked, "Have you ever prayed for someone who was very sick and unconscious?" I replied, "Of course." He then said, "In your view of sacraments, your prayer for an unconscious person is invalid because they are incapable of consenting faith."³³

Pentecostals are familiar with the communal "prayer of faith." James' instruction on praying for the sick is primary to Pentecostal spirituality:

Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer offered in faith will restore the one who is sick, and the Lord will raise him up, and if he has committed sins, they will be forgiven him (5:14-15).

According to James, it is the faith-filled prayer of the elders, along with the sacramental act of anointing, that restores the sick and even effects forgiveness of sin in behalf of the helpless. This type of communal faith and practice is essential to Pentecostal spirituality. Pentecostals help sinners *pray through* to salvation, sanctification, and Spirit-baptism. In like manner, should infant baptism be understood in terms of the prayers and sacramental rites of the believing community? Finger acknowledges that most Anabaptists allow for the inclusion of children in the life of the church in "a broadly sacramental way." I suspect that most Church of God ministers would concur. If Anabaptist and Pentecostals can allow for God's gracious provision

³³ Father Ben Dallas, Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Vidalia, Georgia, circa 2013.

for unbaptized children, can we embrace infant baptism as a means of that gracious provision?³⁴

In a paper presented at the Believer's Baptism Consultation I wrote,

Understanding infant baptism as prevenient grace may be a way forward. While it may be true that an infant cannot fully know God, it is equally true that God knows all infants while *in utero* (Psalm 139:16-13; Isaiah 49:1; Jeremiah 1:5). God's act of knowing is efficacious and the Scripture suggests that even an unborn child can respond to God's presence (Luke 1:41, 44). The capacity for faith is intuitive and essential to human ontology (Romans 1:19; 2:14-15). Therefore, it follows that infants may respond intuitively to God's gracious act of knowing. All sacraments are in some sense proleptic, even prophetic. All acts of faith anticipate ultimate salvation (1 Peter 1:7-9).³⁵

Anabaptists and the Church of God are inherently suspicious of the hierarchal systems and sacramental practices of the institutional (Roman Catholic) church. This has led to a Docetic ecclesiology common among restorationist movements that insists on a distinction between the institutional (visibly embodied) church and the mystical church. This protest against institutionalism has the unintended result of encouraging the demise of participation in the worship and mission of the church by those who insist that they follow Jesus but don't need the church. We must ask ourselves, "Should restorationists revision an ecclesiology that affirms the church as an embodied and visible divine-human union?" In other words, in our time is it possible to embrace a view of the church as institutional, even hierarchical, that is free of the sociopolitical concerns of the Reformation? Jeffrey Gros, the Roman Catholic former president of the Society for Pentecostal Studies, once proclaimed, "the Anabaptist have won, on the religion and society theme! In the modern (post- or para-, if you will) world we are all functionally free churches, whatever our sacramental claims or historical misadventures."³⁶ Five hundred years after the Reformation can we begin imagining the Christian movement from the perspective of our common hope of new creation in Christ? If the church has been freed from the

³⁴ Finger, 181.

³⁵ Tomberlin, "Believers' Baptism in the Pentecostal Tradition," 431-432.

³⁶ Brother Jeffery Gros, "It Seems Good to the Holy Spirit and to Us: The Ecclesial Vocation of the Pentecostal Scholar," *Pneuma* 34 (2012) 178.

sociopolitical concerns of the sixteenth century, can we now understand the church in terms of an embodied Christo-Pneumatic presence in the world through which God grants measures of grace through sacramental signs?

Furthermore, maybe we should consider moving from the sixteenth century notion of *sola fide* to a first century notion of “faith, hope, love . . . but the greatest of these is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13). I would point out that the various *solas* of Protestantism – *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *sola scriptura*, *solus Christus* and *soli Deo gloria* – suggest that none are actually *sola*. Finger has written that the Reformers believed that “true faith acts through love” but insisted that justification is received “by sheer faith, unformed by any virtues.”³⁷ If love is the greatest Christian virtue, then saving faith must be more than rational confession. In fact, love is the greatest expression of faith – a loving response to the Divine Lover (John 13:34-35; James 2:5-8; 1 John 3:16-18). Love has priority over faith and hope because faith and hope proceed from God’s act of loving (Ephesians 1:3-5; 1 John 4:10-11, 19). *Sola fide* has the tendency to diminish the priority of love. The history of Protestantism demonstrates that *sola fide* is not sufficient to transform the hardness of the human heart, or to eradicate warfare among fellow Christians. Love necessitates community and communal expressions, such as the ecclesial reception of children and those incapable of conscious responses, and even the foot-washing of a stranger. I find it to be a strange contradiction that those who deny baptism as a means of grace to children can so profoundly declare a commitment to peace, justice, and reconciliation including “practicing non-resistance even in the face of violence and warfare.”³⁸ If Christ’s love can be extended to one’s enemies, can the church also extend Christ’s grace to “the one who is least?” (Luke 9:48).

³⁷ Finger, 154. He also writes that Anabaptist theology “has no reason to separate faith and love.”

³⁸ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, Kindle Location 1204.

I suggest that we envision infant baptism in view of concerns raised by the emergence of a secular post-Christian society that has embraced a “culture of death” which is “actively fostered by powerful cultural, economic and political currents which encourage an idea of society excessively concerned with efficiency.” John Paul II explained,

Looking at the situation from this point of view, it is possible to speak in a certain sense of a war of the powerful against the weak: a life which would require greater acceptance, love and care is considered useless, or held to be an intolerable burden, and is therefore rejected in one way or another. A person who, because of illness, handicap or, more simply, just by existing, compromises the well-being or life-style of those who are more favored tends to be looked upon as an enemy to be resisted or eliminated. In this way a kind of "conspiracy against life" is unleashed. This conspiracy involves not only individuals in their personal, family or group relationships, but goes far beyond, to the point of damaging and distorting, at the international level, relations between peoples and States.³⁹

The primary focus of the culture of death is the proliferation of abortion throughout the world which has dehumanized the fetus *in utero*. In other words, a human fetus is subhuman and disposable. Pope John Paul II prophetically warned that, “The contemporary scene, moreover, is becoming even more alarming by reason of the proposals, advanced here and there, to justify even infanticide, following the same arguments used to justify the right to abortion.”⁴⁰ In a paper published in the *Journal of Medical Ethics*, the authors presented a rationale by which infanticide, or after-birth abortion, is justifiable. The abstract states,

Abortion is largely accepted even for reasons that do not have anything to do with the fetus' health. By showing that (1) both fetuses and newborns do not have the same moral status as actual persons, (2) the fact that both are potential persons is morally irrelevant and (3) adoption is not always in the best interest of actual people, the authors argue that what we call ‘after-birth abortion’ (killing a newborn) should be permissible in all the cases where abortion is, including cases where the newborn is not disabled.⁴¹

³⁹ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995) 12. Internet: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html Accessed on 10/6/2016.

⁴⁰ John Paul II, 14.

⁴¹ Alberto Giubilini and Francesca Minerva, “After-birth abortion: why should the baby live?” *Journal of Medical Ethics*, J Med Ethics doi:10.1136/medethics-2011-100411. Internet: <http://jme.bmj.com/content/early/2012/03/01/medethics-2011-100411.full> Accessed on 10/6/2016.

In a culture that increasingly dehumanizes fetuses and infants the Christian church should take every opportunity to protest by affirming fetuses and infants as fully human *imago Dei*. From this perspective infant baptism might be envisioned as a sacramental rite in which the believing community acknowledges the child as *imago Dei*. If the *in utero* John the Baptist can intuitively respond with joy to the presence of the Holy Spirit (Luke 1:41, 44), then we must acknowledge that intuitive response as a child-like faith. The baptismal rite might not signify what the child rationally *knows* about God; but it can affirm God's *knowing* of the child, and even the possibility of the child's intuitive response to the Holy Spirit.

Anabaptist and Church of God pastors have long practiced infant *dedication* rather than infant *baptism*. Infant dedication is understood to be a faith commitment by the parents and local church to properly rear the child in the faith. Infant dedication is not believed to be salvific, but pedagogical. I am reminded of correspondence with a Catholic priest who was familiar with the Charismatic renewal. He had recently attended an Assembly of God worship service in which several infants were dedicated. He said that the ceremonies *looked* very similar and suggested that someone unfamiliar with the theological distinction between infant baptism and infant dedication might believe them to be the same.⁴²

At the Believer's Baptism Consultation I suggested that the Pentecostal distinctive of tongues-speech

. . . informs the Pentecostal way of doing theology. The Holy Spirit inspires a diversity of tongues which must be properly interpreted and discerned. The Holy Spirit inspires words of wisdom and knowledge speaking "with the tongues of men and of angels" (1 Corinthians 12:8-10; 13:1). The task of theology is to understand the mysteries of God. The theologian should be careful to remember that the best discernment, the best interpretation is likened to seeing "in a mirror dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Therefore, the unity of the faith depends upon the primacy of love and embracing the diversity of theological tongues. In other words, a diversity of theological expressions within the

⁴² E-mail conversation with Father Ben Stern, Catholic Diocese of Belleville, Illinois, circa 2007.

Christian church need not signify schism. Pentecostalism resists homogeneous expressions of Christianity.⁴³

A Mennonite delegate to the consultation, Alfred Newfeld, suggested that sacraments should be understood “primarily through the paradigms and instruments of communication theory.” He wrote,

All communication happens through symbols or signs: visual signs, acoustic signs, touch, body language, actions, etc. In every communication there is a message riding on a medium. Sender and receiver must manage the same code in order to codify and decode the message. The sender codifies the message into symbols. The receiver who perceives the symbols needs to decode in order to grasp and understand the message.

He further observed that both sender and receiver must interpret the signs through at least three filters: the cultural filter, the personal filter, and the context of space and time. The challenge is that when “the code language is not exactly the same, the decoding can produce a different message than has been intended.” Therefore, sender and receiver must share “a common sign language.”⁴⁴ Following the motif of tongues-speech and interpretation, I would suggest that precise interpretation (or decodification) is neither possible, nor necessary. Like tongues-speech, sacramental signs are the language of the Spirit which may be diverse, inarticulate, and even unknown. Therefore, as we participate in sacramental rites the intercession of the Holy Spirit is essential. The Spirit helps our weakness, that is, our inability to comprehend the mysteries of God. Because of our inability to comprehend we do not know how to pray, or worship, as we should; therefore the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with sighs, inarticulate groanings, or signs too mysterious for words. God searches the hearts of the worshipers and knows, or interprets, the

⁴³ Tomberlin, “Believers’ Baptism in the Pentecostal Tradition,” 423. I am compelled to point out that I am not suggesting that Pentecostalism, or ecumenism, embrace heterodox creeds, ethics, or practices. I strongly affirm the apostolic credo of “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all” (Ephesians 4:4-6). We should strive to affirm the unity and diversity of the Spirit-formed church as we read Holy Scripture together and discern the movements of the Spirit. After all, even the most liturgical churches recognize diverse rites as they confess a common faith. Also, any reading of the Ante-Nicene theologians suggests diverse rites among the ancient catholic believers.

⁴⁴ Neufeld, 418.

mind of the Spirit who intercedes for the saints according to the will of God (cf. Romans 8:26-27).⁴⁵ This is worship in Spirit and truth.

In the Believer's Baptism Consultation final report, the consultants acknowledged "new insights" that would be helpful in moving forward including, "The change that takes place when we understand the Holy Spirit as *the source of our diversity* as well as our unity" (emphasis mine) and asked, "In what ways, and with what limitations if any, can churches affirm that diversity is a gift of the Holy Spirit as well as unity?" Embracing the possibility of Spirit inspired diversity, the report continued to suggest that consultants should explore the possibility of a "dynamic equivalence" between the journey from infant baptism to confirmation and from infant dedication to believer baptism. Also, the report asked, "Does there need to be a more developed, and more clearly articulated, theology of children and family in our believers' baptism traditions?"⁴⁶ These questions can guide subsequent reflection and dialogue. I am happy to embrace the mysteries of diverse theological languages and practices and eager to dialogue with sisters and brothers in the Faith as we seek to discern and interpret the movements of the Holy Spirit.

⁴⁵ Commenting on Romans 8:27, James D. G. Dunn has written, "The conception of God involved here is fascinating. Whereas the Spirit is naturally conceived of as the searching presence of God (as in Ps 139 and Wisd Sol 1:7), or indeed as God's own penetrating self-knowledge (1 Cor 2:10-11), here the thought is of God's outreaching Spirit itself hidden in the heart of man's creaturely inability and known only to God." *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38a (Dallas: Word, 1988).

Joseph Fitzmyer has written that this intercession of the Spirit is "the source of all genuine Christian prayer" and includes "all manner of communing with God." He continues to say that "No Christian understands this groaning of the Spirit; it is God, the searcher of hearts, who alone understands the "ineffable sighs," the "aspiration" or "striving" of the Spirit itself, i. e., the language of Spirit-assisted prayer." *Romans*, (Yale, 1993) 518-519.

Ernst Käsemann has written that the intercession of the Spirit is necessary precisely because of human weakness. The groans of the Spirit are expressly mentioned in the context of Christian worship "which designates the Spirit acting objectively in the congregation." He says the Spirit "has to intervene if our prayers are to have a content which is pleasing to God." The groanings of the Spirit give voice to "the sufferings of this present time" and anticipate the "glory that is to be revealed" (Romans 8:18). The glory of new creation is hidden "in assaulted faith as hope" and expresses itself "in ecstatic practices at worship, in such a way that not even the community itself knows its true meaning and is represented by the Spirit." *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 240-242.

⁴⁶ "Report: Consultation on Believers' Baptism," *The Ecumenical Review* 67.3, 450-453.

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