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The relationship between baptismal status and spiritual practices among committed Baptist youth

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ABSTRACT

The empirical correlates of baptismal status raise intriguing questions for empirical theologians (does baptism make a measurable difference) and for social scientists (how does baptismal status function as an indicator of religiosity). The present study investigates these problems among a sample of 674 highly committed Christian adolescents participating in a weeklong youth mission and service event sponsored by the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches in Eastern Canada. In this sample, 72% had been baptised as an older child or adolescent, 13% had been baptised only as a baby before they were old enough to make a decision for themselves, and 15% had never been baptised. Multivariate analyses, controlling for sex and age differences and for maternal and paternal church attendance, found significant associations between baptismal status and spiritual practices. The status of never having been baptised is significantly associated with lower levels of church attendance, personal Bible reading, and personal prayer. The status of having been baptised only as a baby is significantly associated with lower levels of church attendance.

Key words: Baptism; prayer; Bible reading; church attendance; Baptist; youth; Canada

INTRODUCTION

The aim of the present study is to examine the relationship between baptismal status and spiritual practices among a group of highly committed Baptist youth who attended Tidal Impact in Moncton and Saint John, New Brunswick, Canada in 2002. The significance of this empirical research question is located within two theoretical contexts: one shaped by theological reflection on the nature and meaning of baptism and the other shaped by social scientific reflection on the investigation of religion within contemporary society.

Theological Perspective: From a theological perspective, the majority of Christian denominations regard baptism as the major rite of initiationⁱ. However, there are some notable non-sacramentalists who provide the recognized exception to the rule such as The Salvation Armyⁱⁱ and the Religious Society of Friendsⁱⁱⁱ, commonly known as the Quakers^{iv}. Both movements have historically emphasized the importance of the inner spiritual life and one's personal relationship with God, resulting in a concern that an emphasis upon public practices such as baptism can lead Christians to view sacraments or ordinances such as baptism as an end in themselves rather than as a sign of the inner work of God^v.

Over the centuries of Christian thought and life, the centrality of baptism as the major rite of initiation has drawn on key passages from the gospels such as Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 1:5; Mark 1:10; and John 3:23^{vi}, from passages in the Acts of the Apostles including 2:37; 2:41; 8:12; and 8:36-37^{vii}, and from a variety of passages in the Pauline Epistles including Romans 6:1ff; 1 Corinthians 6:11; Galatians 3:26-27; and Colossians 2:11ff^{viii}.

As well as appearing to unite many strands of Christian tradition, baptism has also been a great issue of division between different Christian denominations, and this cause of division persists in spite of years of theological conversation and cooperation among both conservative^{ix} and mainline Christians' discussion within the ecumenical movement^x.

In terms of theological debate, differences between churches may be characterized by three main issues. The first issue concerns who may be baptised. One tradition argues in terms of infant baptism and understands baptism to be offered to all at a young age on the basis of the faith and repentance confessed by their parents or godparents. The other tradition argues that

baptism is based upon, and should follow, a personal confession of faith and act of repentance. The second issue concerns the efficacy of baptism. One tradition argues that the effective agent in baptism is the Holy Spirit and that baptism effects significant change irrespective of the intentionality or condition of the candidate. Within the other tradition many argue that grace is not offered through baptism and if it were it would have to be actively and consciously received by the candidate to be effective. The third issue concerns the indelibility and permanence of baptism. One tradition argues that the new ontological status that is conferred through baptism cannot be forfeited and that rebaptism is neither desirable nor possible. The other tradition argues that rebaptism following a personal confession of faith and act of repentance is desirable. Clearly there are also significant linkages between these three issues.

In as much as theological claims about baptism may be making empirical claims about individual differences among people, these claims may become the proper matter of investigation among empirical theologians. If baptism is thought to effect some real change in individuals, it might be possible to specify the nature of that change in ways amenable to empirical investigation. For example, if baptism is conceptualized as a special dispensation of divine grace, and if divine grace is conceptualized as promoting a positive relationship between creator and creature reflected in nurturing visible spirituality and spiritual practices, then a set of relationships have been specified that could be investigated. This conceptualization would be especially interesting to bring to a study of Baptist youth since most Baptists have historically viewed Baptism as a public confession and demonstration of one's faith, not as a moment when grace is dispensed upon the one being baptised^{xi}.

Social Scientific Perspective: From a social scientific perspective, baptismal status is one of those enigmatic indicators of religiosity that may or may not be closely correlated with other religious indicators. In this sense baptismal status may function somewhat like the self-assigned religious affiliation. Self-assigned religious affiliation is often found to function as a poor predictor of religious belief or religious practice and yet nevertheless remains a significant predictor of the socially significant correlates of religion within the public sphere. The mechanisms underpinning the social significance of the self-assigned religious affiliation have been well rehearsed in the United Kingdom by Fane^{xii} drawing on earlier work in Canada by Bibby^{xiii} and in Australia by Bouma^{xiv}.

In terms of the social scientific debate, questions to be examined include precisely what kind of information is being conveyed by knowing that someone has been baptised, and does this indicator function as a predictor of current spirituality and spiritual practices, or is it largely an empty and vacuous category which could more conveniently be eclipsed from social scientific enquiry regarding individual differences in religiosity within contemporary society.

These not dissimilar issues raised by empirical theology and by the social scientific study of religion could be examined in a variety of ways. For example, one set of empirical questions could be tested in a population of low religiosity in which there might be a significant number of baptised but not practicing individuals. Another set of empirical questions could be best tested in a population of high religiosity in which there might be a minority of practicing individuals who are either not baptised or baptised but not in accordance with the specific teaching or general practice of the group among whom they were practicing. It is this latter context that may prove more interesting for the following reason. From the theological perspective, it is within this context that it would be possible to test whether the non-baptised (or those not properly baptised) displayed lower levels of spirituality compared with their baptised peers. From the social scientific perspective, it is within this context that it would be possible to examine the religious correlates of baptismal status within a group where religious practice or religious belief were relatively high.

Research Context: A unique opportunity to test these theories is provided by an investigation of the young people who attended Tidal Impact, a weeklong biennial youth mission and service event sponsored by the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches, Eastern Canada's largest Protestant denomination. The event, which invited a local church youth group to host a visiting youth group, grew from 69 attendees in 1989 to 1,100 attendees in 2002. Participation in Tidal Impact requires a significant commitment on the part of the young people involved both in terms of time taken in preparing and training for the event as well as participating in it, and in terms of finance since they are required to fund at least part of the cost themselves.

Against this background the present study was designed to examine the relationship between baptismal status and spiritual practices among the group of highly committed Baptist youth who attended Tidal Impact in Moncton and Saint John, New Brunswick in 2002. In particular the following research question was formulated in the conventional style of a

negative hypothesis, namely that there is no association between baptismal status and spiritual practices. If this negative hypothesis were to be supported by the empirical data, these data could be interpreted to challenge the view, for example, that as a source of divine grace baptism promotes a close relationship with God reflected in a higher level of spiritual practices. Operationalisation of this research question requires consideration of two key issues: the definition and measurement of spiritual practices, and the introduction of relevant control variables.

Definition of and measurement of spiritual practices: While *spiritual practices* is a very broad concept, there are three clear behavioural measures which may serve to transform this concept into an operationalised construct, namely church attendance, personal prayer and personal Bible reading. Within the evangelical, non-charismatic, Canadian Christian churches with which most youth groups attending Tidal Impact were affiliated, common expectations of spiritual practices include church attendance, personal prayer, and personal Bible reading. Baptist youth leaders in Eastern Canada, for instance, are encouraged by denominational leaders to stress these markers of spiritual commitment among the youth with whom they minister^{xv}.

Relevant control variables: The direct relationship between baptismal status and the three measures of spiritual practices (church attendance, personal prayer, and personal Bible reading) may, however, be contaminated by other significant factors. The present study proposes to take into account such contaminants by means of multivariate analyses able to control for certain variables before examining the direct relationship between baptismal status and spiritual practices. Previous research draws attention to the specific importance of both personal factors (sex and age) and contextual factors (parental example) in shaping individual differences in religiosity and spiritual practices^{xvi}.

METHOD

Procedure

All the young people attending Tidal Impact were invited to complete a detailed questionnaire as part of their participation at one of six afternoon Concerts of Prayer held during the weeklong program. Following an explanation of the nature of the survey and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, the questionnaires were handed out to the young

people as they arrived for the two-hour Concert of Prayer, an event that focused on prayer and singing. From the 792 youth registered for the event, a total of 754 questionnaires were returned wholly or partially completed, making a response rate of 95%.

Measures

Baptismal status was computed to distinguish between three groups: those who had never been baptised, those who had been baptised only once as a baby, and those who had been baptised later in life as a child, teenager, or adult.

Parental church attendance and *self church attendance* were recorded on a five-point scale: never, once or twice a year, sometimes, at least once a month, and nearly every week.

Personal prayer and *personal Bible reading* were recorded on a five-point scale: never, occasionally, at least once a month, at least once a week, nearly every day.

Sample

In order to ensure that the analyses were not distorted by disrupted home backgrounds or by other sections of missing data, young people who could not report on both maternal and paternal church attendance or who had omitted significant sections of the questionnaire were excluded from the subsequent analyses. The analyses were, therefore, conducted on a sample of 674 Baptist adolescents comprising: 35% males and 65% females; 22% were aged 13 and under, 33% were 14 or 15 years of age, 22% were 16 or 17 years of age, and 23% were aged 18 or over.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The three indices of spiritual practice confirmed that the sample comprised a group of highly committed young people. In terms of Sunday worship, 90% attended church nearly every week, with a further 3% attending at least once a month and only 7% attending less frequently than once a month. In terms of personal prayer, 68% prayed by themselves nearly every day, with a further 19% praying at least once a week and only 13% praying less frequently than once a week. In terms of personal Bible reading, 27% read the Bible by themselves nearly every day, a further 29% did so at least once a week, and a further 13% did

so at least once a month, leaving 31% who read the Bible by themselves less frequently than once a month.

The majority of the young people in the sample came from churchgoing homes. Three-quarters (76%) of the young people reported that their mother attended church nearly every week, and a further 4% at least once a month. This left 12% of mothers who attended church less often than once a month and 8% who never attended church. Two-thirds (64%) of the young people reported that their father attended church nearly every week, and a further 5% at least once a month. This left 16% of fathers who attended church less often than once a month and 15% who never attended church.

As might be expected in a sample of young Baptists, the majority of the young people had been baptised when they were old enough to make a decision for themselves (72%). Of the remainder, 15% had never been baptised and 13% had been baptised only as a baby before they were old enough to make a decision for themselves. It is these two smaller groups (those baptised only as a baby and those never baptised) who are of particular interest to the present study.

Table 1 presents the correlation matrix for the key variables included in the present study:

- insert table 1 about here -

sex, age, church attendance, personal prayer, personal Bible reading, maternal church attendance, paternal church attendance, and baptismal status. Three dummy variables are included in this matrix: sex is coded, male = 1 and female = 2; baptised as a baby and not again later in life is coded, yes = 1 and no = 0; never baptised at any time in life is coded, never baptised = 1, baptised = 0. Given the number of correlations which are being tested simultaneously in this correlation matrix it would be prudent to interpret as statistically significant only those that reach the .01 level of probability. Two key findings relevant to the hypotheses of the present study emerge from these data. First, the status of never having been baptised is significantly associated with lower levels of church attendance, lower levels of personal prayer and lower levels of Bible reading. Second, the status of having been baptised only as a baby is significantly associated with lower levels of church attendance but

not significantly associated at the .01 level of probability with either personal prayer or personal Bible reading.

The correlation matrix also demonstrates how age, sex, and parental religious practice are correlated both with the indices of spiritual practice and with baptismal status. These correlations might suggest the following dynamics at work among other possible conclusions. In terms of baptismal status, the inverse association between age and not being baptised may simply indicate that some of the younger participants have been associated with the Baptist church long enough to have come to a profession of faith. The inverse association between parental church attendance and not being baptized may suggest that it may be more difficult for young people to seek baptism if their churchgoing does not receive parental support. The positive association between parental church attendance and being baptised as a baby may suggest that these young people have come from highly religious backgrounds not shaped by the Baptist emphasis on believer's baptism. The positive association between age and churchgoing, personal prayer, and Bible reading may suggest that commitment to spiritual practices increases as young people mature within the Baptist tradition. The positive association between parental church attendance and churchgoing, personal prayer, and Bible reading may suggest that parental example continues to be strongly influential among young people within this age band and their religious tradition.

Table 2 presents the multiple regression models designed to examine the relationship between

- insert table 2 about here -

baptismal status and spiritual practices after taking into account individual differences in sex, age, paternal church attendance and maternal church attendance entered into the equation in that fixed order. These data confirm that, after controlling for the other variables: the status of never having been baptised is significantly associated with lower levels of church attendance, lower levels of personal Bible reading, and lower levels of personal prayer; and the status of having been baptised only as a baby is significantly associated with lower levels of church attendance, but not with lower levels of either personal prayer or personal Bible reading. Although the proportion of variance accounted for by baptismal status is small, the association is of statistical significance (that is, greater than could be expected by chance) and visible even after taking into account other factors that are likely to distort the association with parental church attendance.

CONCLUSION

The present study set out to examine the association between baptismal status and spiritual practices among a sample of 674 highly committed adolescents participating in a weeklong youth mission and service event sponsored by the Convention of Atlantic Baptist Churches in Eastern Canada. This association was explored in the light of two theoretical frameworks: one shaped by the concerns of empirical theology and the other shaped by the concerns of the social scientific study of religion.

The theological framework posed the question regarding the efficacy of baptism. It was suggested that, if baptism is conceptualized as a special dispensation of divine grace, and if divine grace is conceptualized as promoting a positive relationship between creator and creature reflected in nurturing visible spirituality and spiritual practices, then among the highly committed a higher level of spiritual practices would be seen among the baptised. This suggestion was formulated in the conventional style of a negative hypothesis, namely that there is no association between baptismal status and spiritual practice. The data did not support this negative hypothesis. The data reveal that the young people who had not been baptised reported lower levels of spiritual practices across all three measures included in this study: church attendance, personal Bible reading, and personal prayer. Moreover, those who had been baptised as infants (prior to being able to make a personal confession of faith according to the normative practice within the Baptist tradition) showed no difference when compared with those who had been baptised as an older child or adolescent in the reported levels of Bible reading and personal prayer. However, those baptised as infants reported significantly lower levels of church attendance compared to those who had been baptised later in life. According to these data infant baptism may be seen to be almost as efficacious as adult baptism, but not quite as efficacious. This empirical evidence may suggest that Baptist theologians may wish to revisit the generally-held view that Baptism is merely a public acknowledgment of one's confession of faith and repentance from sin and consider that the act of Baptism may contain a previously unacknowledged dispensation of grace.

The social scientific framework posed the question regarding the utility of baptismal status as a viable variable within the modelling of individual differences in religiosity. The analogy was drawn between the long-established debate regarding the utility of self-assigned religious

affiliation within the social scientific study of religion and the potential problems that may arise from understanding the utility of baptismal status in such research. The data support the utility of baptismal status as predicting levels of spiritual practices among a group of highly committed adolescents. Even after controlling for other individual (age and sex) and contextual (paternal and maternal church attendance) factors, those who had received baptism at an age when they could make a personal confession of faith (consistent with the norms of the Baptist tradition in which they were participating) reported higher levels of church attendance, Bible reading, and personal prayer, in comparison with their peers who had not been baptised. Moreover, those who had been baptised as infants (and not at an age when they could make a personal profession of faith according to the normative practices within the Baptist community) demonstrated lower levels of church attendance in comparison with their peers who have been baptised at a later age. According to these data there is value in the social scientific study of individual differences in spiritual practices among the religiously committed taking seriously the inclusion of a question on baptismal status that differentiates at least between the three options of not baptised, baptised as an infant, and baptised as believer later in life.

The intriguing findings from the present study deserve replication and extension. Further research in the field would be wise to address three main limitations with the present study. First, the present study is limited to one ecclesial tradition. Further research might want to explore the association between baptismal status and spiritual practices among denominations that practice paedobaptism. Second, the present study is limited to just three (rather crude) indicators of spiritual practices. Further research might want to extend this range of indicators. Third, the present study employed a somewhat restricted range of control variables. Future research might want to extend the number and quality of control variables employed.

Table 1 Correlation matrix

	church going	personal prayer	Bible reading	father church	mother church	age	sex
not baptised	-0.13***	-0.16***	-0.15***	-0.14***	-0.10**	-0.20***	-0.01
only baptised as baby	-0.21***	+0.08*	-0.08*	+0.16***	+0.24***	-0.09*	+0.03
sex	-0.03	+0.10**	+0.11**	-0.05	-0.07	-0.06	
age	+0.08*	+0.12**	+0.27***	+0.05	+0.01		
mother church	+0.44***	+0.14***	+0.13***	+0.63***			
father church	+0.39***	+0.17***	+0.09*				
Bible reading	+0.24***	+0.47***					
personal prayer	+0.21***						

note, * = $p < .05$, ** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Table 2 Multiple regression

predictor variables	r ²	increase			beta	t	P<
		r ²	F	P<			
<i>church attendance</i>							
sex	0.001	0.001	0.5	NS	+0.006	0.2	NS
age	0.008	0.007	4.7	.05	+0.045	1.3	NS
father church	0.155	0.147	115.3	.001	+0.168	3.8	.001
mother church	0.220	0.065	54.8	.001	+0.296	6.6	.001
baptised as baby	0.231	0.011	9.4	.01	-0.126	3.5	.001
not baptised	0.237	0.006	5.3	.05	-0.083	2.3	.05
<i>personal prayer</i>							
sex	0.011	0.011	7.4	.01	+0.119	3.1	.01
age	0.027	0.016	11.1	.001	+0.089	2.3	.05
father church	0.055	0.028	19.6	.001	+0.116	2.4	.05
mother church	0.057	0.002	1.4	NS	+0.037	0.7	NS
baptised as baby	0.059	0.002	1.2	NS	-0.071	1.8	NS
not baptised	0.074	0.015	10.5	.001	-0.129	3.2	.001
<i>Bible reading</i>							
sex	0.012	0.012	7.9	.01	+0.131	3.5	.001
age	0.086	0.074	53.7	.001	+0.247	6.5	.001
father church	0.094	0.008	5.6	.05	-0.008	0.2	NS
mother church	0.104	0.011	7.9	.01	+0.118	2.4	.05
baptised as baby	0.105	0.001	0.7	NS	-0.054	1.4	NS
not baptised	0.114	0.009	6.4	.01	-0.098	2.5	.01

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- ⁱⁱ Cf. P. Layton, *The Sacraments and the Bible* (London: Red Shield Books, 2007).
- ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. R. Jones (ed.), *The Journal of George Fox* (Richmond IN: Friends United Press, 1976).
- ^{iv} H. L. Ingle, *First Among Friends: George Fox and the Creation of Quakerism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 3.
- ^v Cf. Jones, and Layton.
- ^{vi} W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: an Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 1994) 966ff.
- ^{vii} I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1980) 80ff.
- ^{viii} G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1973) 127ff.
- ^{ix} Cf. Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, *The Lausanne Covenant* (Lausanne: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1974).
- ^x Cf. World Council of Churches, *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982).
- ^{xi} M. Erikson, *Christian Theology: Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker, 1998) 1098ff.
- ^{xii} Cf. R. S. Fane, Is Self-assigned Religious Affiliation Socially Significant? in L. J. Francis (ed.) *Sociology, Theology and the Curriculum* (pp.113-126) (London: Cassell, 1999).
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- ^{xiv} Cf. G. Bouma, *Religion: Meaning, Transcendence and Community in Australia* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1992).
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- ^{xvi} Cf. W. K. Kay and L. J. Francis, *Drift from the Churches: Attitude Toward Christianity During Childhood and Adolescence* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1996).