


ARTICLE

Birthing Waters: An Anglican View of Baptismal Regeneration

Esteban E. Crawford¹ 

Email: estebancrawford25@gmail.com

(Received 22 September 2022; revised 14 January 2023; accepted 14 January 2023; first published online 14 February 2023)

Abstract

In what sense do Anglicans believe in baptismal regeneration? This article contends that according to historic Anglicanism, baptism effectually regenerates those who faithfully receive it. While this is a disputed claim even among Anglicans, it is consistent with the formularies of the Church of England, and it largely represents a predominant position held by Anglicans across the centuries. Article XXVII of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion will serve as the primary point of reference for assessing the above question. The following study is organized in three sections that respectively address: (1) the sacramental efficacy of baptism; (2) the regenerative nature of baptism; and (3) the need for faith to accompany baptism. Each section examines diverse historical expressions relevant to these doctrines in light of their scriptural basis. A brief reflection on infant baptism concludes the paper.

Keywords: baptism, baptismal regeneration, effectual sign, faith, new birth, right reception, Thirty-Nine Articles

In her book *The School of Charity*, Anglican writer Evelyn Underhill refers to baptism as a mutual act that ‘cleanses and receives us [into the Church], does something; knocks off the fetters of our sub-human past, admits us to a new level of life, makes us citizens of another Patria, with a real and awful series of privileges and powers and a real and awful series of responsibilities’.² Baptism for Underhill is a transformative event that ‘does something’, really ‘admits us to a new level of life’ and demands everything from us. Far from originating with her, such an understanding of the sacrament stems from the broader tradition Underhill inhabited, a tradition that has long upheld the real and awful series of privileges, powers and responsibilities that characterize this initiatory rite.

While articulated in her own creative fashion, Underhill’s portrayal of baptism reflects a classic Anglican perspective. One major document which conspicuously

¹Esteban Crawford is a doctoral student at St Mary’s University, Twickenham, UK.

²Evelyn Underhill, *The School of Charity: Meditations on the Christian Creed* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956), pp. 91–92.



sets forth this vision of baptism is the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. Article XXVII specifically asserts that:

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference whereby Christian men are discerned from other that be not christened, but it is also a sign of regeneration or new birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God, by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; faith is confirmed, and grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God.³

These are daring affirmations about the manifold nature and function of baptism. Though each clause of this intricate article deserves careful exposition, this paper will primarily focus on what it means for baptism to be an instrumental sign of regeneration for those who receive rightly. Put otherwise, this essay will consider in what sense Anglicans believe in baptismal regeneration.

According to historic Anglicanism, baptism effectually regenerates those who faithfully receive it. While this is a controversial claim even among Anglicans, it is consistent with the foundational formularies of the Church of England, and it largely represents a predominant position held by Anglicans across the centuries.⁴ The following study will be structured in three parts that will respectively address: (1) the sacramental efficacy of baptism; (2) the regenerative nature of baptism; and (3) the need for faith to accompany baptism. Each section will evaluate various historical expressions of these doctrinal affirmations in light of their scriptural basis. The paper will conclude with a brief reflection on how Anglicans find the practice of infant baptism to be congruent with their notion of baptismal regeneration.

The Sacramental Efficacy of Baptism

As noted above, Article XXVII refers to baptism as a visible sign of regeneration, incorporation into the Church, forgiveness and adoption. At first sight, such language might seem to be describing baptism as strictly a symbolic sign rather than a sacramental one. Nevertheless, the original intention of this article was to do exactly the opposite. As Martin Davie notes, Article XXVII was meant to refute

³'Of Baptism', in Martin Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith: A Commentary on the Thirty Nine Articles* (Malton: Gilead Books, 2013), p. 489.

⁴It is worth noting that among Anglicans there is a great variety of interpretations regarding baptism in general and baptismal regeneration in particular. The intention of this paper is not to explore all views in exhaustive detail, but rather to thoroughly examine one prominent view that has largely remained consistent over the last five centuries. While not specifically focused on baptismal regeneration, Kenneth Stevenson's book *The Mystery of Baptism in the Anglican Tradition* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1998), is a superb survey of diverse Anglican understandings of the sacrament. He studies the writings of nine seventeenth-century figures (such as Richard Hooker, William Perkins, George Herbert and Richard Baxter) and outlines how they each highlight different aspects of God's baptismal action and our faithful human response. Despite this wide range of emphases, Stevenson concludes that there is little in Article XXVII 'with which any of our writers would have quarreled, with the exception of Perkins and possibly Baxter' (p. 169). Accordingly, this article will serve as the primary point of reference for investigating the notion of baptismal regeneration in the Anglican tradition.

radical notions held by some Protestants who reduced baptism to no more than an external manifestation of inward commitment to God, and thus deemed infant baptism to be unacceptable.⁵

That no purely symbolic view of baptism is being endorsed here is further apparent in light of the article's immediate context. Two articles earlier, Article XXV unashamedly affirms that the sacraments ordained by Christ (namely baptism and the Lord's Supper),

be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession, but rather they be certain sure witnesses and effectual signs of grace and God's good will towards us, by the which He doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our faith in Him.⁶

The sacraments, therefore, are not just tokens of human profession, but certain and sure witnesses of divine salvation; they are not mere signs, but effectual signs of God's grace and good will towards those who receive them. 'Certain', 'sure', 'effectual' – these are audacious adjectives that convey how strongly the English Reformers believed the sacraments actually communicate what they visibly symbolize (a truth which cannot be forgotten when interpreting Article XXVII).

As Richard Hooker, in concert with this tradition, would later state, the sacraments are not '*naked signs* and testimonies assuring us of grace received before, but (as they are indeed and in verity) for means effectual whereby God when we take the sacraments delivereth into our hands that grace available unto eternal life, which grace the sacraments represent or signify'.⁷ Simply put, baptism and Communion are sacraments, and as such, they surely effect what they signify,⁸ genuinely gracing all faithful recipients in this present age with the riches of the world to come. In the case of baptism in particular, it effectually signifies all the blessings mentioned in Article XXVII: regeneration, entrance into the Church, forgiveness of sins, adoption into God's family (and even more).

It is worth underscoring that in formulating such a high view of baptismal efficacy, the English Reformers were treading on sound scriptural ground. As Peter Leithart points out, 'the Bible attributes an astonishing power to this water initiation', far more than many Protestants are willing to admit.⁹ St Peter calls the crowds to repent and be baptized 'in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit' (Acts 2.38, ESV; cf. 22.16). Elsewhere, he writes that baptism 'now saves you, not as removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience through the resurrection of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 3.21).

St Paul claims that 'all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death' (Rom. 6.3). We were buried with Christ 'by baptism into

⁵Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 490.

⁶'Of the Sacraments', in Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 467.

⁷Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, vol. 2 (Ellicott City, MD: Via Media, 1994), V.lvii.5, p. 258. Original emphasis.

⁸Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 492.

⁹Peter J. Leithart, *The Baptized Body* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2007), p. 51.

death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life' (Rom. 6.4; cf. Col. 2.11-12). As many as 'were baptized into Christ have put on Christ' (Gal. 3.27). And 'in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body' (1 Cor. 12.13). In light of texts such as these, one can see why the Reformers stressed that baptism effectually signifies all that Scripture says it does.

Furthermore, it is crucial to clarify that the efficacy of baptism is grounded in the objectivity of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Baptism is not a magical or mechanical act, but an evangelical one. If baptism is efficacious, it is because Jesus is mighty to save sinners. In the words of Michael Green, baptism 'is effective *ex opere operato*, in one very important sense of that much misunderstood phrase. It is effective because of what God in Christ has done for us, not because of any action or profession of faith that we make to him.'¹⁰ The givenness of this gospel sign far surpasses our willingness to receive and respond to God's redeeming initiative.

'For baptism,' continues Green, 'points to the solid, objective nature of God's rescue, and ushers us into the unbroken stream of those who have, down the ages and across the world, made that salvation their own, within the family of the Christian Church.'¹¹ This is why baptism is called a sign of grace. It visually and physically plunges us into the sure reality of Christ's saving work. Baptism 'is nothing less than the gospel in action', declares Frank Colquhoun.¹² And one of the major elements of this redemptive action is the regeneration of dead sinners.

The Regenerative Nature of Baptism

Article XXVII specifically refers to baptism as 'a sign of regeneration or new birth'.¹³ This imagery abounds throughout multiple key Anglican documents. Two representative examples from the 1662 Prayer Book are 'A Catechism' and the liturgy for 'The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants'. In the catechism, after establishing that water is the outward visible sign of the sacrament of baptism, the following relevant exchange appears.

Question. What is the inward and spiritual grace [of baptism]?

Answer. A death unto sin, and a new birth unto righteousness: for being by nature born in sin, and the children of wrath, we are hereby made the children of grace.¹⁴

The spiritual grace of this sacrament is dual. Baptism slays sin and begets new creatures. This twofold grace overcomes the natural reality that all humans are born sinners, and carries out God's supernatural design to remake sinners unto righteousness, thus recreating abandoned children of wrath into adopted children of

¹⁰Michael Green, *Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice, and Power* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1987), p. 19.

¹¹Green, *Baptism*, p. 19.

¹²Frank Colquhoun, *Your Child's Baptism* (Bungay: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969), p. 18.

¹³'Of Baptism', in Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 489.

¹⁴'A Catechism', in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662) (London: Everyman's Library, 1999), p. 293.

grace. One's sinful condition is thus reversed into a new mode of existence through baptism with water in the name of the Trinity.

In harmony with the catechism, the liturgy for the public baptism of infants introduces the service in the subsequent way:

Dearly beloved, forasmuch as all men are conceived and born in sin, and that our Saviour Christ saith, none can enter into the kingdom of God, except he be regenerate and born anew of Water and of the Holy Ghost: I beseech you to call upon God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that of his bounteous mercy he will grant to *this Child* that thing which by nature *he* cannot have.¹⁵

Like the catechism, this opening address acknowledges the biblical teaching that all people are born in sin. Stress is laid on Christ's words about no one being able to enter God's kingdom unless he or she is born again of water and the Holy Spirit (Jn 3.5). The liturgical context of this exhortation, at the beginning of the baptism service, illustrates how Anglicans have traditionally taken Christ's saying to be intricately linked with the rite of baptism.

Moreover, the transformation that is expected to unfold throughout this service, as expressed in the above citation, is all predicated upon the bounteous mercy of the Triune God who alone can grant to human beings – even to the smallest of children – what by nature they cannot have. Both 'A Catechism' and 'The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants' insist that grace pervades the sacrament of baptism. And new life is one of the principal blessings which flows from this grace-filled event according to these two documents. Both employ a daring terminology that distinctly reflects a regenerative conception of baptism. Once again, these bold expressions are founded on scriptural truth.

The link between water cleansing and spiritual renewal harkens back to the Old Testament. As announced by the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord promised to the people of Israel that one day he would make them clean through water and place his Spirit within them. 'I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you . . . And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes' (Ezek. 36.25-27). A new covenant between the Lord and his people is being anticipated here, one whereby Israel's idolatrous corruption would be thoroughly washed away, and new obedient hearts would be formed by the Spirit's indwelling. The sacrament of baptism certainly seems to align with the content of this prophecy.

The New Testament also connects water and Spirit to rebirth and regeneration. In Jn 3.5, the passage alluded to earlier, Jesus forthrightly tells Nicodemus that 'unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God'. Some scholars debate whether 'water' in this case actually refers to baptism. Multiple Church Fathers such as St Cyril of Jerusalem and St Augustine of Hippo read it this way. While instructing his catechumens, Cyril admonished them not to merely consider 'the bare element', the waters they would soon enter, but to also 'look for its saving power by the operation of the Holy Ghost; for without the

¹⁵'The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants', in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662), p. 268.

two thou canst not be made perfect'.¹⁶ Cyril reasons in this manner on the basis of Jn 3.5. 'This is not my word,' he adds, 'but the Lord Jesus Christ's, who has the power to do it; He saith, *Except a man be born again*, and he enlarges, *of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God*.'¹⁷

This same text led Augustine to believe that water and blood flowed from the side of the crucified Christ so that the penitent thief could be baptized and thus reach the paradise he was promised.¹⁸ 'Like most people in his day,' comments Gerald Bray, 'Augustine was a firm believer in baptismal regeneration, the conviction that baptism is the means by which a person is born again into the new life in Christ.'¹⁹ As appealing (or not) as these arguments from tradition may be, a stronger exegetical case can be made in light of the literary context of Jn 3.5.

Christ's conversation with Nicodemus is not the first nor the only instance where water and Spirit are coupled together in John's Gospel. Two chapters before, these two elements appear in John 1, where the Holy Spirit descends upon Christ as he comes to be baptized with water by John the Baptist (1.29-34). Water and Spirit are explicitly mentioned in relation to baptism. As Leithart notes, this is the background that precedes the dialogue with Nicodemus.²⁰ While Jesus is indeed the one who baptizes with the Spirit (Jn 1.33), he never says that one is born again by the Spirit alone, but by water and the Spirit. Furthermore, chapter 3 itself closes by stating that Jesus was baptizing his followers (3.22-26), and chapter 4 opens by reiterating that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John, even though it was not Jesus himself who performed the baptisms, but his followers (4.1-2).²¹

Hence if water and Spirit are connected to baptism (as in Christ's baptism), and baptizing people is part of how Christ himself makes disciples immediately after his encounter with Nicodemus, then how could Jesus not be referring at all to baptism when he says that one must be born of water and the Spirit to enter God's kingdom? It seems safe to assume that the Lord's disciple-making practice corresponds with his teaching. 'And this is the way Jesus makes disciples,' concludes Leithart. 'He personally enlists disciples into His service through the physico-spiritual combination of water and the Spirit. That's the way He made disciples in His own ministry. That's the way He still makes them.'²² Anglicans, therefore, have both traditional and textual support from Jn 3.5 for developing a theology of baptismal regeneration.

Another pertinent New Testament passage that associates regeneration with water and the Spirit is Tit. 3.5. This passage proclaims that Christ saves us 'by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit'. If this verse is speaking about baptism, as the wording seems to suggest, then this sacrament needs to be considered as part of God's regenerative work. Leithart points out how the word

¹⁶Cyril of Jerusalem, *The Catechetical Lectures of S. Cyril, Archbishop of Jerusalem* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1838), pp. 26-27.

¹⁷Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures*, p. 27.

¹⁸Gerald Bray, *The Faith We Confess: An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (London: The Latimer Trust, 2009), p. 151.

¹⁹Bray, *The Faith We Confess*, p. 151.

²⁰Leithart, *The Baptized Body*, pp. 80-81.

²¹Leithart, *The Baptized Body*, p. 81.

²²Leithart, *The Baptized Body*, p. 81.

'regeneration' appears only twice in the New Testament, here and in Mt. 19.28.²³ In the Gospel it 'refers to a cosmic transformation or a coming epoch of history', which Leithart identifies with 'the New Covenant order, the order of life in Christ'.²⁴ If this same meaning is present in Tit. 3.5, then baptism can be conceived as the New Covenant sign that 'initiates the baptized into the regeneration, into the renewed humanity and renewed cosmos that is the body of Christ'.²⁵ These are some of the main biblical texts upon which Anglicans base their doctrine of baptismal regeneration.

Such an understanding of baptism, combined with a high view of sacramental efficacy, has led Anglicans across the centuries to confess that God is able to truly regenerate those who are baptized in His name. Following this logic, the Prayer Book deems a baptized child 'regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ's Church'.²⁶ Historically, this language has been contentious among Anglicans. 'Few will deny that these words are one of the chief stumbling-blocks that the Prayer-Book presents to devout and thoughtful minds', notes A.E. Barnes-Lawrence.²⁷ 'Does the truth lie with the High Churchman, who takes them as literally and invariably true in the case of every baptized infant, or with the Low Churchman, who believes them to be nothing more than the language of faith and hope in view of Christ's Sacrament?'²⁸

The Gorham judgment, a nineteenth-century ecclesiastical dispute, is a clear manifestation of how divisive this matter can be. Henry Phillpotts, Bishop of Exeter (1831–1869), declined to institute George Gorham to a living in his diocese on the basis that Gorham did not believe that regeneration accompanied baptism in every case without exception. So severe was this controversy that in the end it reached the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council.²⁹

Some Anglo-Catholics, such as those who supported Bishop Phillpotts in the Gorham controversy, take the above assertion from the Prayer Book to mean that baptism literally regenerates everyone who receives it invariably. Edward B. Pusey, John Keble and Henry Manning are several notable figures who disagreed with Gorham's position.³⁰ Pusey wrote extensively on the subject of baptismal regeneration in his tracts. He argued that in Scripture 'there is no hint that Regeneration can be obtained in any way but by Baptism'.³¹ Furthermore, he contended that in the

²³Leithart, *The Baptized Body*, p. 77.

²⁴Leithart, *The Baptized Body*, p. 77.

²⁵Leithart, *The Baptized Body*, p. 77.

²⁶The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants', in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662), p. 273.

²⁷A.E. Barnes-Lawrence, 'Baptismal Regeneration in Church History', *Churchman* 16.163 (April 1902), pp. 347-57 (347).

²⁸Barnes-Lawrence, 'Baptismal Regeneration in Church History', pp. 348.

²⁹Green, *Baptism*, p. 57; Bray, *The Faith We Confess*, pp. 155-56; Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 492.

³⁰All three of them signed a document protesting the decision reached by the Judicial Committee. Pusey and Keble conversed with each other to see if Gorham could be legally tried for heresy. Soon after this incident Manning joined the Roman Church. Michael Chandler, *An Introduction to the Oxford Movement* (New York: Church Publishing, 2003), pp. 97-103.

³¹Edward B. Pusey, 'Scriptural Views of Holy Baptism', Tract 67 in *Tracts for the Times Vol. 2* (New York: AMS Press, 4th edn, 1969), p. 27.

Bible our 'life in Christ is, throughout, represented as commencing, when we are by Baptism made members of Christ and children of God', not before and not after.³²

John Henry Newman, who would eventually convert to Roman Catholicism, similarly held that 'regeneration comes only by baptism'.³³ The act of regeneration in this perspective seems to be exclusively tied to the rite of baptism. Peter Toon points out 'that since the nineteenth century "baptismal regeneration" has carried the general Roman Catholic and strong Anglo-Catholic meaning that Baptism rightly performed automatically causes regeneration, unless the recipient actively resists it'.³⁴ This is a common way people tend to think of baptismal regeneration.

On the other hand, some Evangelicals interpret the above assertion from the baptismal liturgy in purely promissory or symbolic terms, even to the point of denying baptism to have any real instrumental effect whatsoever upon one's regeneration. J.C. Ryle reasons that the composers of the Prayer Book selected this language in 'the judgment of charity and hope' that all baptized children are supposedly regenerated, cognizant that such a change would only become apparent (or not) based on the future fruit of one's life.³⁵

Bray is a contemporary scholar who emphatically affirms baptism to be promissory, not regenerative. For him, the promise annexed to baptism 'is not to be equated with the actual gift, nor is it a guarantee that the gift will be rightly used once it has been given'.³⁶ Simply put, it is a gospel promise that 'will only become real as and when it is appropriated by the person to whom it has been made'.³⁷ According to Bray, what 'baptism cannot do is bring about real regeneration. If it could, there would be no need to preach the Gospel at all'.³⁸

In this view, regeneration is distanced from baptism. The moment when one comes to personal conscious faith in response to the gospel is considered as the real locus of new birth. Consequently, baptism ceases to be an efficacious sign of regeneration, and becomes a bare sign, one that can still point to and even anticipate the gift of new life, but cannot in actuality communicate its grace. While closely related to each other, baptism and regeneration remain intrinsically disjointed from one another.

Toon discerns this pattern in the preaching of John Wesley and George Whitefield, two men who fervently beckoned a nation full of baptized people to be born again. "These evangelists preached to "nominal Christians" as if they were

³²'That life,' continues Pusey, 'may through our negligence afterwards decay, or be choked, or smothered, or well-nigh extinguished, and by God's mercy again be renewed and refreshed; but a *commencement* of life in Christ after Baptism, a death unto sin and a new birth unto righteousness, at any other period than at that one first introduction into God's covenant, is as little consonant with the general representations of Holy Scripture, as a commencement of physical life long after our natural birth is with the order of His Providence.' Pusey, 'Scriptural Views of Holy Baptism', p. 28.

³³David J. Phipps, 'John Henry Newman's Adoption of Baptismal Regeneration, and the Relative Importance of John Bird Sumner, Richard Mant and William Beveridge to his Development', *New Blackfriars*, 76.898 (November 1995), pp. 500-10 (509).

³⁴Peter Toon, *Mystical Washing and Spiritual Regeneration: Infant Baptism and the Renewal of the Anglican Way in America* (Philadelphia, PA: Preservation Press of the Prayer Book Society of the USA, 2007), p. 20.

³⁵J.C. Ryle, *Knots Untied* (Moscow, ID: Charles Nolan, 2000), p. 141.

³⁶Bray, *The Faith We Confess*, p. 155.

³⁷Bray, *The Faith We Confess*, p. 155.

³⁸Bray, *The Faith We Confess*, p. 155.

heathen, as if they were not baptized in the Triune Name . . . they preached, “Ye must be born again,” and equated the new birth, regeneration, with both an internal renewal and an outward conversion, available there and then.³⁹ In this manner, Wesley and Whitefield unwittingly ‘undermined or denied the doctrine of the Baptismal Services’.⁴⁰ Toon claims that this trend continues to influence how Anglicans today conceive of the relation between baptism and regeneration.⁴¹

Davie insightfully proposes a middle way between the Anglo-Catholic and the Evangelical readings, one more akin to that of the Reformers.⁴² He points to Alexander Nowell’s *Catechism* for illustration. After articulating how the baptismal benefit of regeneration is rooted in Christ’s death and resurrection, Nowell includes the following interaction:

M[aster]. Do all generally, and without difference, receive this grace?

S[cholar]. The only faithful receive this fruit: but the unbelieving, in refusing the promises offered them by God, shut up the entry against themselves, and go away empty. Yet they do not thereby make the sacraments lose their force and nature.⁴³

Only the faithful, that is, those who through faith conform their lives to the pattern of Christ’s death and resurrection, these are the ones who receive the regenerative grace and fruit of baptism. Personal faith matters invariably when it comes to enjoying the saving benefits of baptism. The unbelieving, on the contrary, by willfully denying to believe in Christ and live for him, cut themselves off from the fullness of grace, and evaporate themselves from the life-giving stream of God’s promises. Nevertheless, and this is a key point, unfaith does not undo the power and purpose of the sacraments. Can human faithlessness ‘nullify the faithfulness of God?’ (Rom. 3.3). Certainly not!

Without cheapening nor minimizing the grace of baptism, Nowell’s *Catechism* concisely supplies a sound scriptural view of the sacrament consistent with the Articles which does not succumb into either invariable regeneration or mere symbolism. ‘What Nowell is saying,’ summarizes Davie, ‘is that baptism really delivers God’s gift of a new birth, but that this gift has to be received and where it is not received then the gift is unfruitful.’⁴⁴ Both real grace and real obedience are jointly preserved in this formulation of baptismal regeneration.

³⁹Toon, *Mystical Washing*, p. 23.

⁴⁰Toon, *Mystical Washing*, p. 23.

⁴¹There is no doubt but that Anglicans of an Evangelical sympathy or mindset have been profoundly affected by the Evangelical tradition of separating regeneration from Baptism, and that many assume that this separation is specifically what is taught by the Holy Scriptures and assumed by the Anglican Reformers.’ Toon, *Mystical Washing*, p. 23.

⁴²Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 492.

⁴³Alexander Nowell, *Nowell’s Catechism* (ed. G.E. Corrie; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press/Parker Society, 1853), pp. 208. Cited in Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, pp. 492-93.

⁴⁴Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 493. In concert with Davie’s middle way, Toon similarly believes that the Reformers ‘did accept that regeneration occurred at Baptism, but only because of the Gospel from God received by faith. For them the Rite in and of itself and rightly performed did not, in and of itself, automatically produce spiritual regeneration . . . Rather the Rite/Sacrament as God’s ordinance caused regeneration where there was active repentance for sin and belief in the gospel.’ Toon, *Mystical Washing*, p. 20.

Interestingly enough, George Gorham was legally vindicated in 1850, and the Privy Council articulated a very similar position to that of Nowell's, which claimed the following:

That baptism is a sacrament generally necessary to salvation, but that the grace of regeneration does not so necessarily accompany the act of baptism that regeneration invariably takes place in baptism; that the grace may be granted before, in or after baptism; that baptism is an effectual sign of grace, by which God works invisibly within us, but only in such as worthily receive it – in them alone it has a wholesome effect.⁴⁵

As with Nowell's *Catechism*, these statements reflect a balanced approach to baptismal regeneration that simultaneously maintains the efficacy of the sacrament as well as the vitality of right reception. In short, then, the wholesome effect of the baptismal benefit of regeneration is inextricably bound to the fruitful exercise of personal faith. Only those who receive baptism in faith enjoy its regenerative grace. And this is precisely what the Thirty-Nine Articles affirm.

The Need for Faith to Accompany Baptism

According to Article XXVII, baptism is a 'sign of regeneration or new birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive baptism rightly are grafted into the Church'.⁴⁶ In order for baptism to be effectual and regenerative, the article specifies that it must be received rightly. And what exactly does this mean? Davie explains that 'rightly' here is not concerned with ritual rightness (as important as it is), but rather with rightful reception.⁴⁷ Other articles clarify this point.

Article XXV asserts of the sacraments that 'in such only as worthily receive the same, have they a wholesome effect or operation: but they that receive them unworthily, purchase to themselves damnation, as Saint Paul saith'.⁴⁸ This article is applying the apostle's teaching on the Lord's Supper in 1 Cor. 11.17-34 to the sacraments in general. When a sacrament is received unworthily, instead of accomplishing what it signifies, it incurs judgment upon the presumptuous recipient. Article XXVIII further elucidates what it means to receive baptism rightly by indicating that Communion is to be received 'rightly, worthily, and with faith'.⁴⁹ Such a set of qualifications sheds light on the intended meaning of 'rightly' in Article XXVII, as this term implies that baptism is also to be undertaken 'worthily and with faith'.

John Rodgers observes that 'worthily' in this instance does not mean 'that we deserve the grace that we receive from Christ in and through the sacraments, but rather that we take part in the sacrament in an appropriate manner, that is, with

⁴⁵Cited in Green, *Baptism*, p. 57.

⁴⁶Of Baptism', in Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 489.

⁴⁷"Rightly," here does not mean that the right acts have been performed in the sense of the candidate being baptised with water in the name of the Trinity. What it means is that those who have been baptised must receive rightly what God has given to them.' Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 493.

⁴⁸Of the Sacraments', in Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 467.

⁴⁹Of the Lord's Supper', in Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 503.

an intentional, humble, repentant faith in Christ as our Lord and Savior'.⁵⁰ Right reception, therefore, does not signify that one has to be perfect in order to partake of the sacraments, nor that one must have an impeccable motivation or disposition when doing so – who could ever be baptized or take Communion with a clean conscience were this the case? No, right reception is about partaking of the sacraments with proper regard for what they are, visible signs of Christ's gospel, which call for humble trust in God and readiness to walk in his will.

Concerning the sacrament of baptism in particular, the 1662 catechism details the following requirements.

Question. What is required of persons to be baptized?

Answer. Repentance, whereby they forsake sin: and faith, whereby they steadfastly believe the promises of God, made to them in the Sacrament.⁵¹

Baptism is indeed an act of God's unmerited grace towards helpless sinners, yet this blessed fact does not abolish the place of human response within this covenantal event. The old sinful self is to be left behind in the waters of death; the new baptized self is to rise forth into a life of faithfulness defined by confidence in God's promises as signed and sealed in baptism. Regeneration is one of the many promises linked with baptism that is to be steadfastly believed upon in order to be completely realized.

Apart from faith, new life cannot fully flourish among the baptized. This same logic applies to all other baptismal benefits. Grace without faith is of no permanent profit to all who stubbornly refuse to live in the reality of their baptism. 'We are left to the inevitable conclusion,' pens Ryle, 'that in all cases *worthy reception* is essential to the full efficacy of the sacrament.'⁵² While baptism as an act '*does accomplish something*,' states Scot McKnight, 'baptism unattended by personal faith *doesn't accomplish its full design*'.⁵³ For baptism to be entirely efficacious, then, it needs to be accompanied by lively faith and hearty repentance.

Consequently, baptism does not invariably guarantee what it signifies to those who oppose it in unbelief. Scripture makes this clear. While all the people of Israel were 'baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea . . . with most of them God was not pleased' (1 Cor. 10.2-5). As John the Baptist proclaimed to the Pharisees and Sadducees who came to him, baptism demands bearing fruit in keeping with repentance (Mt. 3.7-10). Simon Magus was baptized, yet that did not prevent him from trying to purchase the Holy Spirit to his own ruin (Acts 8.9-24). The call to be born from water and the Spirit, therefore, cannot be divorced from the call to repent and believe; both are imperative for entering God's kingdom according to Christ (Mk 1.15; Jn 3.5).

⁵⁰John H. Rodgers, *Essential Truths for Christians: A Commentary on the Thirty-Nine Articles and an Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Blue Bell, PA: Classical Anglican Press, 2011), p. 472.

⁵¹'A Catechism', in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662), p. 293.

⁵²Ryle, *Knots Untied*, p. 149. Original emphasis.

⁵³Scot McKnight, *It Takes a Church to Baptize: What the Bible Says about Infant Baptism* (Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2018), p. 103. Original emphasis.

All things considered, Article XXVII exhibits a remarkably nuanced biblical theology of baptism. The article candidly recognizes that baptism involves at once God's saving action as well as faithful human reception, yet it wisely avoids resolving the tension between these mutually interpenetrating aspects of the sacrament. 'Notice the balance,' comments Green: '*As by an instrument* stresses the general efficacy of baptism. *They that receive baptism rightly* stresses that this is far from automatic. Baptism is the pledge of God's new life. But it is like a seed; it only germinates when it encounters the water of repentance and sunshine of faith.'⁵⁴

In terms of baptismal regeneration, this means that baptism is really capable of truly regenerating those who are baptized, insofar as they persevere in the new life into which they were plunged. This is indeed a perplexing paradox, but a precious one also. As Kenneth Stevenson notes, in Article XXVII we encounter 'the paradox of baptism as both sacrament and experience', a gospel truth that transcends human understanding, and a holy mystery before which words 'pale into insignificance, however eloquent or precise or beautiful'.⁵⁵ In sum, the mystery of baptism embodies the initiative of God's grace and the indispensability of human response in one single sign.⁵⁶ 'In this sacrament God confronts me with total demand, and total succour.'⁵⁷

Conclusion

As intimated in Underhill's opening definition, the sacrament of baptism is a truly transformative act that is replete with a host of real privileges and responsibilities. According to Article XXVII of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, some of the most fundamental privileges associated with baptism are Church membership, regeneration, forgiveness and adoption. These benefits are efficaciously applied to all who receive the sacrament rightly, worthily and with faith (see Articles XXV and XVIII). This paper has contemplated the baptismal grace of regeneration from an Anglican perspective as presented in the Articles and other significant Anglican documents.

Historic Anglicanism holds to a judicious understanding of baptismal regeneration that is grounded in scriptural truth and is largely continuous with the Church's catholic tradition. While emphasizing God's regenerative action in baptism, Anglicans also acknowledge that full regeneration requires personal repentance and faith. Such a view safeguards the objective power of Christ's gospel without neglecting our own subjective responsibility to apprehend the Lord and his good news with our whole beings. Radical interpretations, either Roman or Protestant, are avoided here; the mystery of baptism is upheld in paradoxical tension. This paradoxical logic, nevertheless, raises multiple questions.

⁵⁴Green, *Baptism*, p. 56.

⁵⁵Stevenson, *The Mystery of Baptism*, p. 169.

⁵⁶In light of Col. 2.11-12, baptism 'corresponds to circumcision under the Old Covenant. It is a mark of the covenant or agreement between God's grace and our response. Not just of his grace, nor just of our response. It is the seal both on his initiative and our response.' Green, *Baptism*, p. 25.

⁵⁷Green, *Baptism*, p. 50.

For one, if Anglicans believe that baptism really regenerates whoever receives it rightly, then how is it that Anglicans administer the sacrament to infants? While such a question is beyond the scope of this essay, suffice it to say for now, that as has been implied above, Anglicans consider infant baptism to be congruent with their doctrine of baptismal regeneration. After enumerating all the blessings baptism signifies, Article XXVII concludes: ‘The baptism of young children is in any wise to be retained in the Church as most agreeable with the institution of Christ.’⁵⁸ Such a statement seems to presuppose that children can actually receive all the graces that baptism effects, including regeneration. Although children cannot verbally attest to being born again, Anglican parents gladly baptize their children in the hope that they will be. Infant baptism thus serves as a corporate covenantal act of prayer that welcomes the children of Christians into the new life of Christ’s body.

Anglicans, therefore, do not presume infants to be regenerate because they have been baptized, but rather pray for them to be regenerate by God’s grace through baptism. This is apparent in the baptismal liturgy. ‘Give thy Holy Spirit to *this Infant*, that *he* may be born again, and be made *an heir* of everlasting salvation, through our Lord Jesus Christ.’⁵⁹ A church which believes that even infants can be regenerated in baptism is one that continually prays for God to do what he only can do. J.I. Packer says it best:

In infant baptism we consecrate young children to God, commit them by proxy to thoroughgoing adult Christianity, ask God to bring this about, and administer to them God’s own covenant sign, seal and bond of this full adult relationship. Believing that our actions accord with his will, and that he is a faithful, loving, prayer-answering God, we trust that he has now received the children covenantally and in some way started the work in them that we have asked him to do; so, we finally pray that the children will be led on from regeneration thus begun into fullness of faith and faithfulness.⁶⁰

⁵⁸‘Of Baptism’, in Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 489. While the explanation given by the article is fairly general, the Reformers are more specific in *Reformatio Legum Ecclesiasticarum*. ‘[T]he children of Christians do not belong any less to God and the church than the children of the Hebrews once did, and since circumcision was given to them in infancy so also baptism ought to be imparted to our children, since they are participants in the same divine promise and covenant, and have been accepted by Christ with the greatest human kindness.’ Cited in Davie, *Our Inheritance of Faith*, p. 497. For further arguments for infant baptism see Green, *Baptism*, pp. 65-77.

⁵⁹‘The Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants’, in *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662), p. 270.

⁶⁰J.I. Packer, *Baptism and Regeneration* (Newport Beach, CA: Anglican House, 2014), pp. 16-17. Cited in McKnight, *It Takes a Church to Baptize*, pp. 92-93.