

**THE DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE OF BAPTISM  
IN THE HISTORY OF THE  
EVANGELICAL UNITED BRETHREN CHURCH**

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## STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

In searching for a topic for investigation and advanced study, I wrote to D. J. Willard Kreckler, editor of THE TELESCOPE-MESSENGER, weekly publication of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, asking him if there were any fields in the history of our denomination which would prove fruitful to investigation. Among the list of those he suggested was the topic of this paper. I gratefully acknowledge his suggestion and encouragement. The assistance given by Dr. Paul Holdcraft, retired minister and historian of the Pennsylvania Conference of the United Brethren in Christ, is also hereby acknowledged.

It is not the intent of this paper to cover the entire scope of the proposition but to seek to recapitulate the problems that existed in the two denominations before union, the problems caused by their union, the development of the doctrine and practice of baptism in the denomination, and how our denomination has arrived at an ecumenical attitude and doctrine with respect to this half of Protestant Sacramental belief.

## INTRODUCTION

It seems in order to relate to the reader, in brief, a history of the denomination known to Christendom as the Evangelical United Brethren. The facts presented are a matter of record, put down in scholarly, efficient utterances by Dr. Raymond W. Albright, the historian of the former Evangelical Church, and by Dr. A.W. Drury, who occupied the same position in the Church of the United Brethren in Christ.

"Both denominations are distinctly American churches."<sup>1</sup> They arose out of the spiritual awakening of the late eighteenth century which took place in America and Europe alike. Essentially, both churches conceived of the task of the church in the same fashion and for one hundred and fifty years had lived side by side in "friendly and sympathetic fellowship."<sup>2</sup> The following paragraphs contain only a simple history of these denominations, but they will help us to better understand the movement that took place in the lives of those early church leaders.

### The United Brethren in Christ

In the eighteenth century it pleased the Lord to raise up among the sons of men certain leaders to carry on the work of his Holy Commission so that His Kingdom might come. "Among others, He raised up William Otterbein and Martin

Boehm in the state of Pennsylvania, and George A. Guething in the sate of Maryland, armed them with the spirit, grace and strength to labor in His neglected vineyard and to call, among the Germans in America, sinners to repentance."<sup>3</sup> These men began to labor among their flocks and found that the work was in need of more hands. They went forth searching for those of similar mind and attitude to continue to work for the Lord as members of their company.

The society continued to increase and the work of the reformation spread throughout Pennsylvania, Maryland and Virginia. Several large meetings were held to asses the work of the society and to plan work for the future. "At one of these meetings it was resolved to hold a conference of all the preachers, in order to consider in what manner they might be most useful."<sup>4</sup>

"The first conference was held in the city of Baltimore, Maryland, in the year of our Lord 1789."<sup>5</sup> There were seven preachers present at that meeting. Further meetings were held, the next one in Paradise Township, York County, Pennsylvania, in 1791. Increased growth of the work over time indicated the need for a more disciplined form of organization, hence in September of 1800, in the house of Brother F. Kemp, an organizing conference was conducted. There were thirteen preachers present at this meeting.

"There they united themselves into a society which bears the name UNITED BRETHREN IN CHRIST, and elected William Otterbein and Martin Boehm as Superintendents, or Bishops, and agreed that each of them should have liberty as to the mode of Baptism, to administer it according to his own convictions."<sup>6</sup>

From these beginnings the Society grew and continued its good work till the union was consummated in 1946 with the Evangelical Church. Since that time its spirit has continued to inspire those who seek to serve the Lord wherever His children need shepherding.

#### The Evangelical Church

"Upon the instruction and advice of that godly minister of the Gospel, Jacob Albright, a number of persons in the state of Pennsylvania, who had become deeply convinced of their sinful state, through his ministrations, and who earnestly groaned to be delivered from sin, united in A.D. 1800, and agreed to pray with and for each other, that they might be saved from sin, and flee from the wrath to come."<sup>7</sup> These were the things that drew men together and called them to seek one another out for spiritual help and mutual undergirding in the faith. Organization was started when Albright established Class Leaders and set up three classes.

The first conference of the church was held in what is now Kleinfeltersville, Lebanon County, Pennsylvania, in 1807. At the time of this meeting, the membership totaled 220. The group was known as THE ALBRIGHTIANS, after their leader, and that name remained until the name THE EVANGELICAL ASSOCIATION was formally adopted in 1816.

Almost a century of labor, fervent and fruitful, found dissension mounting in the church, and ultimately these differences grew to such proportions that a schism was affected. Thus, in 1891, a large number of ministers and members separated themselves from the denomination and organized, in 1892, into a denomination called the UNITED EVANGELICAL CHURCH. The two denominations worked side by side, continuing in zeal and effectiveness, and increasing in numbers and missionary enterprise.

After twenty years of separation, it was felt that the two churches should reunite. After considerable study and deliberation in the two denominations, a partial Basis of Union was agreed upon in 1918. The Union was finally consummated through Joint Committee actions and on October 14, 1922, the two groups united under the name THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH.

#### The Evangelical United Brethren Church

The fellowship that existed between the Evangelical Church and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ was such that, after previously unsuccessful attempts at union, church leaders of both denominations met at Atlanta, Georgia, in 1924 to discuss proposals for the union of their churches. At the 1933 General Conference of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, a resolution was presented by Bishop M.T. Maze, a delegate from the Evangelical Church, which led to the commissioning of a group to study and present a Plan of Union to the two denominations. The results of the study of this group were presented to the churches and finally, on November 16, 1946, the Consummation of Union was read to the assembly gathered in the Johnstown, Pennsylvania, First United Brethren Church, and THE EVANGELICAL UNITED BRETHREN CHURCH was established.

Thus the fellowship of over a century and one-half was realized and the work of our Lord Jesus Christ was advanced when men recognized that they could best serve their Lord by serving together. May this continue to be the impetus that shall cause men to put aside the things of the world that the things of the Spirit might have first place and the Lord's will shall be done.

## BAPTISM IN THE UNITED BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH

The question of baptism was not one that bothered the founder of the United Brethren. Very few of the papers and letters of Mr. Otterbein are extant. This is tragic so far as the history of the church is concerned, for Mr. Otterbein was a man well-versed, highly respected, and deeply evangelical. He was the type of individual from whom the church of today could learn much and receive great inspiration.

From the close relationship and affinity of Bishop Otterbein with Bishop Asbury of the Methodist Episcopal Church, we learn of their agreement in matters of a theological nature. Bishop Asbury became acquainted with Mr. Otterbein through his relationship with The Rev. Benedict Schwope. After their meeting, the two men became fast friends and Mr. Asbury asked Mr. Otterbein to assist in the consecration service at the Christmas Conference of 1784, at which time Mr. Asbury was consecrated as a Bishop in the Methodist Episcopal Church in America.

The agreement between these two spiritual giants existed in spite of the fact that Mr. Otterbein knew little English and Mr. Asbury knew no German. There was also a physical difference; Mr. Otterbein was large and impressive in appearance, while Mr. Asbury was medium in height and almost boyish in appearance. "Great as were the contrasts between these men, the things in which they were alike, though hidden more or less from view, were greater and more decidedly marked. They had yielded to the same truth; they had experienced the same things; they preached the same doctrines; they were each intrusted with a great mission."<sup>8</sup>

The earliest practices of baptism in the United Brethren Church were, in general, confined to infant baptism with no particular emphasis made on the necessity of adult baptism by immersion. This would be expected from Mr. Otterbein's earlier associations as a Reformed preacher.

The first official statement appears in the first Discipline of the church in 1814:

*Article 5. We believe that the doctrine which the Holy Scriptures contain, namely, the fall in Adam and salvation through Jesus Christ, shall be preached and proclaimed throughout the whole world.*

*We recommend that the outward signs and ordinances, namely, baptism and the remembrance of the Lord in the distribution of the bread and the wine, be observed; also the washing of feet, where the same is desired.*<sup>9</sup>

This admonition was evidently sufficient for quite some time, for no other official record is found in the church until the General Conference of 1853, when this statement is recorded in the conference minutes:

*A considerable amount of time and attention was given to the matter of infant baptism. The Church always had given liberty as to the mode of baptism, but now the question was as to the subjects of baptism. Some preachers had spoken lightly of infant baptism, and others had taken delight in baptizing again those that had been baptized in infancy. Henry Kumler, Jr., moved that those thus offending should be regarded as traducers of their brethren, and that one who administered baptism to an adult that had been baptized in infancy should be brought to trial for the same. He believed that for himself in his baptism as a child he had actually received grace that tendered his heart toward personal religion in his early years. The conference forbade disrespect toward infant baptism and those that saw fit to make use of the same, but did not go further.*<sup>10</sup>

A remarkable stabilization had been achieved in the United Brethren denomination, as this is the last statement of official record with respect to baptism until the church united with the Evangelical Church in 1946. Its policy remained stable with respect to the mode of baptism -- infant baptism. Adult baptism was not frowned upon, but re-baptism was, in accord with the above directive of 103 years previous, not held or practiced.

The policy of the United Brethren Church has, in general, been congruent with the policy of the Methodist Church. This agreement may be traced to a meeting of Mr. Asbury on May 4, 1774, with Messrs. Otterbein and Schwope. This was the first meeting between Asbury and Otterbein, and the former recorded the event in his journal:

*Had a friendly intercourse with Mr. O. and Mr. S., the German ministers, respecting the plan of church discipline on which they intend to proceed. They agreed to imitate our methods as nearly as possible.*<sup>11</sup>

This statement of general accord seems to have set the policy for the denomination up to the time of its union with the Evangelical Church in 1946.

## BAPTISM IN THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

That the practice of baptism as it was utilized by the Methodists was not abhorrent to Albright and his followers is evidenced in Dr. R.W. Albright's History of the Evangelical Church:

*One might logically have expected Albright to seek his ordination at the hands of the Methodists among whom he was an official lay evangelist. He could have found no doctrinal hindrances here, for before his death he discussed and recommended their doctrine to George Miller. Upon Albright's death, Miller completed the first Discipline and articles of faith, which, when they appeared in 1809, were almost identical with those of the Methodists.*

*Albright placed broad emphasis on the sacraments and could hardly have been satisfied with the brief creed consisting of five articles, which Otterbein and his followers adopted at their first conference in 1789. In a postscript to this creed the sacraments were mentioned; baptism was recommended as a sign, the Lord's supper as commemorative, and feet washing as an example.<sup>12</sup>*

Further indication of Albright's consideration of the sacraments is found in the fact that he did not perform the functions of the ministry until after his ordination on November 5, 1803. After his ordination, however, he freely administered the sacraments. "In November, 1803, Albright baptized Michael, son of Abraham Ream, of Centre County, Pennsylvania, an ancestor of Dr. A.E. Gobble, late president of Central Pennsylvania College. This same year he baptized Mary, daughter of Benjamin Stroh, of Dauphin County, Pennsylvania."<sup>13</sup>

The preceding statements give us an understanding of the position taken by Albright with respect to the doctrine and practice of baptism in his newly established society.

In keeping with the conformity of Albright to the Methodist policy of baptism, the new denomination used the mode of infant baptism and adult baptism, with no specific direction as to sprinkling, pouring or immersion. In practice, the case was left primarily to the judgment of the pastor as to whether the subject be sprinkled, doused or immersed. (The choice was also to be agreed upon by the candidate or sponsors.) This is excellently illustrated in the life of the first bishop of the Evangelical Association, Bishop John Seybert. The incident took place in 1836.

September 18th, he baptized seven persons, "three of whom were baptized under water, and the other four with water. The baptism of the Holy Ghost came down upon all the subjects of baptism on this occasion, both upon those who were baptized with water and upon those who were put under the water. The Lord made no difference between them, nor showed any special favor to those who were immersed. The saints who were present were also greatly blessed."<sup>14</sup>

Such a witness would be hard to refute, even for those who hold strictly to the necessity of immersion for the reception of the Spirit. The sacrament of baptism, highly regarded by the founder of the Evangelical church, needs to have his fervor present today as we dedicate and consecrate our children to the Lord and His work.

Later expansion of the church found a problem arising from the re-baptism of adults who had been baptized as children. Action was taken on this matter at the General Conference of 1835. In that conference certain acts of legislation were passed; one of those dealt with aforementioned problem.

The second legislation resulted from charges preferred against a preacher of the Western Conference in 1829 for baptizing a person who had already been baptized in infancy. The result was "a unanimous resolution expressly forbidding our preachers to re-baptize under any circumstances."

The reasons given for the action are: (1) our church Discipline gives no such direction; (2) we can find no authority in the Sacred Scriptures for re-baptism; (3) it is our belief that its introduction would be followed by evil consequences. The Eastern Conference endorsed the action. This unconditional action, however, was later modified by the General Conference of 1839: "Our preachers were authorized to administer, preach and defend infant as well as adult baptism according to our form; also to re-baptize such persons who were baptized in their childhood if they make application and cannot otherwise satisfy their consciences, no preacher being allowed, however, to advocate re-baptism."<sup>15</sup>

The General Conference of 1836 reaffirmed and strengthened the stand taken the by the Conference the previous year, as noted by this statement found in the Conference record:

*Entire freedom was granted to members of the church regarding baptism. The method of baptism to be used was purely optional and a person who had been previously baptized might be baptized again if he so desired.*<sup>16</sup>

The year 1891 found that controversy and dissention of past years had increased to the place to which division in the church was brought about, by the breaking off from the majority of the church of a small group which organized itself as the United Evangelical Church. This organization was formalized in a General Conference session held November 29, 1894, at Grace Church in Naperville, Illinois. According to Dr. Albright in his History of the Evangelical Church the real causes for the division were "(1) the placing of additional limitation upon the episcopal form of church government, (2) the keen personal rivalry among leaders of the denomination."<sup>17</sup>

It is apparent by the lack of any contradictory material that the policies of the denomination before the split, with respect to baptism, remained the policies, doctrines and practices of the two continuing groups -- the Evangelical Association and the United Evangelical Church. After the passage of less than three decades, the leaders of the two denominations, perhaps realizing the ineptitude of the schism, felt that the church should be reunited. This reunion took place on October 10, 1922.

The doctrine and practice of baptism in the reunited church was the doctrine and practice set forth by the denomination's original founder, Jacob Albright. Article XIV of the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical Church states that position thus:

*(a) Holy Baptism.*

*Baptism is not merely a token of the Christian profession whereby Christians are distinguished from others, and whereby they obligate themselves to observe every Christian duty; but it is also a sign of internal ablution, or the new birth.*<sup>18</sup>

**THE DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE OF BAPTISM  
AS ADOPTED BY THE ORGANIZING CONFERENCE OF 1946**

Years of fellowship, planning and deliberation culminated in the 1946 union of the church of the United Brethren in Christ and the Evangelical Church.

*The Plan and Basis of Union having been fully complied with in the mode of procedure to effect organic union, the thirty-fourth General Conference of the Evangelical Church which had been in session in the Beulah Evangelical Church, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, met, on November 16, 1946, with the special session of the thirty-fourth General Conference of The Church of the United Brethren in Christ, in the First United Brethren Church, Johnstown, Pennsylvania, to consummate the union and to become the First General Conference of the Evangelical United Brethren Church... Promptly at 9:00 o'clock, to the majestic strains of the processional hymn "Lead On, O King Eternal," the Bishops entered the crowded sanctuary and before the assembled multitude solemnly read the Declaration of Union.<sup>19</sup>*

The enactment of the union of the two denominations brought no material change in the faith of either one with regard to the sacrament of baptism. Both confessions of faith were printed in the Discipline of the new church, and one may regard this ecumenical approach as indicative of the general spirit of the Evangelical United Brethren Church.

With ecumenicity the by-word in many churches today, it is significant that the Methodist union and the union of these two denominations, plus the anticipated union of the Congregational and Reformed Churches should serve as prelude and postlude to the second meeting of the World Council of Churches, held at Evanston, Illinois, in August of 1954. The ambition of this council is unity in the churches -- unity as a church. But what is it that keeps churches apart? To the layman of today it certainly is not the difference in theological thought. As reported in a recent magazine,

*There was a time when theological differences loomed large to Americans, and they are still important to a few. But today most churchgoers apparently agree with the young man who addressed the chair at a luncheon between the Disciples of Christ and the American Baptist Convention in Columbus in Columbus, Ohio, a few years ago.*

"Mr. Chairman," he asked, "did I understand that there were some historical differences between the Baptists and the Disciples as to immersion?" The chairman, fearing that a tactless question would sabotage a splendid meeting, cautiously admitted there were some differences.

"Well," the young man said, "you church leaders keep those differences to yourself. We don't want to know anything about them."<sup>20</sup>

Among the leaders of the church, however, these doctrinal differences do exist. One of the main differences concerns baptism. "Some denominations, such as the Baptists and the Disciples of Christ, practice total immersion and hold that no person should be baptized until he's old enough to know what he's doing. Others, like the Episcopalians and Lutherans, practice infant baptism, which is accomplished by sprinkling, rather than immersion."<sup>21</sup>

Hope rises that these and other differences may be resolved. When we look to the report of the World Council of Churches issued after the 1954 meeting, we find these statements:

*We must learn afresh the implications of the one Baptism for our sharing in the one Eucharist. For some, but not for all, it follows that the churches can only be conformed to the dying and rising again in Christ, which both Sacraments set forth, if they renounce their eucharistic separateness. We must explore the deeper meaning of these two sacramental gifts of the Lord to His church as they are rooted in His own redeeming work.*<sup>22</sup>

*The unifying work of Christ is given new significance by this report of the section, re: Our oneness in Christ and our disunity as churches -- "The Church's unity is grounded... in his outpouring of the Holy Spirit to each subsequent baptismal rite its deepest significance."*<sup>23</sup>

The Council further reported "we all receive His gift of Baptism whereby in faith, we are engrafted in Him even while we have not yet allowed it fully to unite us with each other."<sup>24</sup> So it is that the responsible leaders of the denominations, recognizing both differences and similarities, are moving in the direction taken over one hundred and fifty years ago by Otterbein and Albright. The "Wir sind Brudern" of Otterbein must be the prayer of all church leaders everywhere if a united church is ever to be realized.

## THE PRESENT DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE OF BAPTISM

The sacrament of Baptism as it is believed and practiced in the Evangelical United Brethren Church today is related in the Discipline of that denomination, and is not substantially different from the doctrine and mode of the founders of the two denominations. There does appear in the Discipline, however, for those who are so minded, a *Service of Dedication* to take the place of the *Ritual for the Sacrament of Baptism*. This move on the part of the denomination points further to the ecumenical spirit of the EUB's.

We dare not assume ecumenicity to mean the dilution of our faith until we have nothing left, but the willingness to put aside those things of this world that keep us separated, in order that the Body of Christ might be one even as He is the singular Head of our church. In this spirit our church moves forward, hopeful for future co-operation in Christendom, confident in the ultimate victory of the Church over the world, blessed because it has shared in bringing this glorious evangel to men.

### FOOTNOTES

1. page 3, The Discipline of the Evangelical United Brethren Church, Evangelical Press, 1951.
2. Ibid.
3. page 4, Op. Cit.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. page 5, Op. Cit.
7. page 7, Op. Cit.
8. page 144, History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ by A.W. Drury, Otterbein Press, 1924 (Revised 1931).
9. page 283, Op. Cit.
10. page 438, Op. Cit.
11. page 144, Op. Cit.
12. page 71, A History of the Evangelical Church by R.W. Albright, Evangelical Press, 1942.
13. page 73, Op. Cit.
14. page 162, The Life of Bishop John Seybert by S.P. Spreng, Lauer & Mattill, 1888.
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16. page 177, Op. Cit.
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19. page 38, Op. Cit.

20. page 20, "Will All Protestants Unite in One Church?" by Caspar Nannes, Collier's, August 20, 1954.
21. page 22, Op. Cit.
22. pages 90-91, The Evanston Reporter: The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1954 edited by W.A. Visser 'T Hooft, Harper, 1955.
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