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8-1-2020

# Inward Baptism: The Theological Origins of Evangelicalism

Baird L. Tipson
*Gettysburg College*

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Recommended Citation
Tipson, Baird. *Inward Baptism: the Theological Origins of Evangelicalism*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020.

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## Inward Baptism: The Theological Origins of Evangelicalism

### Description

*Inward Baptism* analyses the theological developments that led to the great evangelical revivals of the mid-eighteenth century. Baird Tipson here demonstrates how the rationale for the "new birth," the characteristic and indispensable evangelical experience, developed slowly but inevitably from Luther's critique of late medieval Christianity.

Addressing the great indulgence campaigns of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, Luther's perspective on sacramental baptism, as well as the confrontation between Lutheran and Reformed theologians who fastened on to different aspects of Luther's teaching, Tipson sheds light on how these disparate historical moments collectively created space for evangelicalism.

This leads to an exploration of the theology of the leaders of the Evangelical awakening in the British Isles, George Whitefield and John Wesley, who insisted that by preaching the immediate revelation of the Holy Spirit during the "new birth," they were recovering an essential element of primitive Christianity that had been forgotten over the centuries. Ultimately, *Inward Baptism* examines how these shifts in religious thought made possible a commitment to an inward baptism and consequently, the evangelical experience.

### Keywords

Conversion, Religious Experience, Evangelicalismsm, decline of sacramentalism

### Disciplines

Christianity | History | History of Religion | Religion

### Publisher

Oxford University Press

### ISBN

9780197511473

This book is available at The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/books/172

# Introduction

> Our entire salvation depends on this promise, and we must be watchful to keep our faith in it knowing without any dubiety of mind that, once we have been baptized, we are saved. —Martin Luther[1]

> Say not then in your heart, I *was once* baptized; therefore I *am now* a child of God. Alas, that consequence will by no means hold. How many are the baptized gluttons and drunkards, the baptized liars and common swearers, the baptized railers and evil-speakers, the baptized whoremongers, thieves, extortioners! What think you? Are these now the children of God? —John Wesley[2]

By the early twenty-first century, the first thing many people imagined when they heard the term *Protestant* was someone the mass media called an "evangelical." Articles about "evangelicals" appeared in prominent magazines and newspapers; politicians tailored policies to attract "evangelical voters"; media pundits who had previously ignored religion found themselves scurrying to understand the influence of an undeniably religious movement.

The new-found attention paid to evangelicalism unnerved many Protestants, who often felt that their religious life had little in common with the "evangelical" practices about which they were now reading. Ever since the publication of Martin Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* in 1517, almost all Protestants had proudly considered themselves evangelical. After all, the term stemmed from the Greek word for "gospel," *euangélion*. Protestant denominations such as the Evangelical United Brethren and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America actually included the term in their titles. In

[1] Martin Luther, *De captivitate Baylonica ecclesiae praeludium*, *WA* VI: 484–573, p. 516; trans. Bertram Lee Woolf, *The Pagan Servitude of the Church*, in John Dillenberger, ed., *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 249–359, p. 277.
[2] John Wesley, "The Marks of the New Birth," in *Works* I: 417–430, pp. 428–429.

*Inward Baptism*. Baird Tipson, Oxford University Press (2020). © Oxford University Press.
DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780197511473.001.0001

countries such as Germany, *evangelical* had become a synonym for *Protestant*. What right did one group of Protestants have to reserve this time-honored term for themselves?

Most of these "mainline" Protestants (an unhappy term that has passed into general usage) were not aware that *evangelicalism* in this narrower sense had its own time-honored history. What historians call the first great "evangelical revivals" took place in Great Britain and its North American colonies in the mid-eighteenth century. Anyone who had not experienced a "new birth," said the leaders of these revivals, should not consider herself a Christian. Through its many twists and turns, the evangelical movement has remained faithful to this core conviction for two and a half centuries.

Yet a serious student of Protestantism will immediately be struck by what seems like an enormous gap between the theology of Martin Luther and that of an early evangelical such as John Wesley or George Whitefield. What sort of development had had to occur in order for the religion of the sixteenth-century reformers to become the religion of some of their theological descendants? This book will describe that development. It will attempt to explain the critical stages of the theological process that eventually gave birth to the evangelical revivals.

Alongside that description is the argument that there was a thrust to Luther's theological assertions that was bound, sooner or later, to produce evangelicalism. I would be the first to concede that the question of exactly how, exactly when, and exactly where evangelicalism would arise was subject to the same contingency that underlies all human history. But I propose that in the broadest sense, "what happened" happened because, sooner or later, it was going to happen. If you start with a Luther, sooner or later you are bound to get a Wesley.

I first shared the thesis of this book in a talk before the Guild of Episcopal Scholars in the fall of 2015. There is something at the core of Protestant faith, I proposed, that sooner or later was bound to produce the evangelical movement.[3] My status as the group's token Lutheran gave me leeway to take a more critical stance toward Luther's theology than an Episcopalian might have thought polite, but I wanted to suggest that some of the credit or blame for the evangelical movement had to be laid at Luther's doorstep.

[3] Baird Tipson, "How in the World Did We Get from the Protestant Reformation to Evangelicalism?" Fall 2015 Meeting of the Guild of Episcopal Scholars, Cincinnati.



In order to make my case, I described a 250-year theological trajectory that began in the decades immediately before Luther published his *Ninety-Five Theses* and concluded with the theology of the great evangelical revivals in Britain and America in the mid-1700s. But because I wanted to make an argument that would prove useful to people outside the academic community, especially pastors and inquiring laypeople, I decided to forgo the sort of detailed description of two and a half centuries of theological development that an academic audience might expect. Might it not be possible, I hoped, to make sense of an extraordinarily consequential transition from one kind of Christian theology to another by touching down at just a few critical moments?

I argued that during the period immediately before 1517, the church had made assumptions that were essentially sacerdotal: a priest, bishop, or pope, given authority by the institutional church, conveyed forgiveness of sins and membership in God's family. Luther was perfectly comfortable with the private confession through which forgiveness of sins had been traditionally offered, but he denied that the sorts of things penitents did to earn God's favor were efficacious.[4] The truth was simple: God had made a promise, that promise was proclaimed and reinforced in preaching and in the sacraments, and Christians simply had to trust that God would do what he promised.

It turned out to be not quite that simple. Not everyone listening to the preacher's words, not everyone being baptized or participating in the Lord's Supper, would actually enjoy God's favor. If one failed to believe the promise, one would not be included in God's family. And if faith meant trust, as Luther thought it did, it would somehow have to engage the human being who trusted promises as well as the God whose promises were trusted. God may have taken the initiative to create an individual person's trust, but from the moment of "justification," that person would presumably be aware that he or she trusted.

How could such persons be certain, though, that they had not fooled themselves into imagining that they trusted? Might their trust actually be no more than wishful thinking? Luther would have been appalled at the idea, but laypeople would inevitably worry that they did not "believe enough."

Luther's advice to those in doubt about their faith boiled down to remembering their baptism. Just recall the promise God made to you when you were

[4] See Ronald Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys: Confession, Conscience, and Authority in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 57.

baptized, he wrote, and believe that when God made that promise, he had you particularly in mind. This might have been an effective pastoral strategy, but scholars of Luther's writings recognize that it failed to resolve the problem.[5] Or better, as a recent study concludes, "substituting faith for sorrow and the authority of the Word for the authority of the ordained priest solved some problems, but it created others."[6] As against a sacerdotal approach, Luther had pushed what we can term *altered subjectivity*, a conversion of the fallen will to an attitude of trust.

I could have appealed to almost any traditional liturgy to illuminate the problem, but since I was speaking to a group of Episcopalians, I used as an example the liturgies of the Book of Common Prayer. The prayer book (originally 1549; subsequent versions retain this language) assured parishioners that faithful participation in the worship of the Church of England would satisfy God's expectations. At the conclusion of the baptismal service, for example, the priest beseeched God to "grant that all thy servants which shall be baptized in this water . . . ever *remain in the number of thy faithful and elect children*." In the Eucharist, the celebrant prayed on behalf of all who had partaken of the bread and wine that God "dost *assure* us thereby of his favour and goodness towards us, and that we be very members incorporate in thy mystical body, which is the blessed company of all faithful people, and be also heirs through hope of thy everlasting kingdom."[7] Those who regularly attended services in their parish church would have every reason to assume that they enjoyed God's favor.

But priests of the Church of England, all too familiar with the many vices of their parishioners, found it impossible to imagine that every baptized and communing parishioner was a child of God. Some would be in their pews only because their presence was compelled by law. The more radical of those priests preached openly that their hearers should *not* base their assurance of salvation on what they called the "means" of grace: mere participation in the liturgies of the prayer book. Turning to places such as 1 John 3:14: "We know that we are translated from death unto life, because we love the brethren," and

[5] Brian A. Gerrish, "'To the Unknown God': Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," in Brian A. Gerrish, *The Old Protestantism and the New: Essays on the Reformation Heritage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 131–149, 334–345, p. 137, makes this argument persuasively.

[6] Rittgers, *The Reformation of the Keys*, p. 216.

[7] *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies in the Church of England, 1552*, in Joseph Ketley, ed., *The Two Liturgies, A. D. 1549, and A. D. 1552 . . . Set Forth by Authority in the Reign of King Edward VI* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844), 187–355, pp. 289, 280, emphasis added.



2 Peter 1:10: "Wherefore, brethren, give rather diligence to make your calling and election sure," they argued that although works could play no part in the actual justification of a sinner, one would inevitably do good works as soon as one was justified. The ability to perform some of these works—loving other Christians, for example, as in 1 John 3:14—could therefore provide evidence that one's faith was authentic. I called this approach an altered practice providing evidence of an altered subjectivity: assurance from living a life of obedience rather than a life of sin. Problem solved.

Or maybe not. Pretty soon, people began to wonder whether, deep down, they really loved the brethren or whether they were just so eager to gain evidence of God's favor that they had convinced themselves that they did. Some historians would argue that this doubt—about the authenticity of the works done by those who wanted to convince themselves that they were faithful—was actually provoked by ministers who feared losing control over the people in their pews. The late-medieval penitential system had tried to achieve a balance between consoling distraught sinners and controlling their behavior, and so these historians see Protestant pastors as no less eager than their medieval forebears to control behavior that they considered immoral. I preferred to think that these pastors were conscientious observers of their flocks who were careful not to let them be lulled into dangerous complacency.

Whatever the reason, both pastors and laypeople began to concentrate on the evidentiary value of a person's behavior. William Perkins, the most influential of the late-Elizabethan preachers, wrote a notorious treatise (headed by 2 Peter 1:10) titled "Whether a Man Be in the Estate of Damnation, or in the Estate of Grace: and If He Be in the First, How He May Come Out of It: If in the Second, How He May Discern It, and Persevere in the Same to the End." Perkins's treatise was actually part of a compilation of several shorter works, none more revealing for our purposes than the first: "Certaine Propositions Declaring How Farre a Man May Goe in the Profession of the Gospell, and Yet Be a Wicked Man and a Reprobate." Very far indeed, it turned out. Wicked men and reprobates not only fooled others with seemingly godly behavior, but they also fooled themselves. What pastors called "the problem of hypocrisy" described people who behaved like the faithful but were ultimately headed for eternal damnation. Even for a preacher like Perkins, the line between the two could be excruciatingly hard to draw.

I then jumped an entire century to the preaching of John Wesley. Like many Anglican priests of his acquaintance, Wesley had been deeply influenced by a book by William Law, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy*

*Life.*[8] Law was not a "Puritan" like Perkins; he was a High Church Anglican, a "non-Juror" who had refused to renounce his oath to James II after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. But Law's extraordinarily high expectations for Christian living—what historians have called his intense Christian perfectionism—led to the same outcome as the Puritan emphasis on behavior.[9] Wesley and many of his colleagues found that they kept falling short of the rarefied expectations of Law's *Serious Call*, and this led them to an "intense awareness" of their own sin. It was precisely such an awareness of personal inadequacy and of the need for divine grace that Puritans like Perkins had understood as an essential step toward conversion. Once men like Wesley began to undergo powerful spiritual experiences of God's favor, they interpreted them as the sorts of "conversion experiences" described in the classic works of Puritan practical divinity.

But there was one important difference. Unlike those of the Puritans, these experiences tended to be not only instantaneous but also, and more significantly for my purposes, "immediate" and self-authenticating. (*Immediate* here is a technical term: without "means.") Luther, John Calvin, and the English Puritans (with the notable exception of the Quakers) had insisted that the Spirit spoke through the scriptural Word, either heard in preaching or experienced visibly in the sacraments. Evangelicals like Wesley could "hear" the Spirit speaking individually to them outside the *medium* of the preached or visible Word. They "knew" they were saved because God had spoken directly to their hearts. So Wesley could say in a famous letter to the Deist Conyers Middleton:

> If, then, it were possible (which I conceive it is not) to shake the traditional evidence of Christianity [i.e., the written words of the Bible], still he that has the internal evidence (and every true believer hath the witness or evidence in himself) would stand firm and unshaken.[10]

Wesley's goal was the same as Luther's: gaining assurance that he enjoyed God's favor. The threat of eternal damnation was real, so real that Wesley

[8] William Law, *A Serioius Call to a Devouit and Holy Life* (London: William Innys, 1729).

[9] E.g., Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (London: Epworth Press, 1989), p. 103.

[10] Cited in John Wesley, *John Wesley*, ed. Albert C. Outler (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 192.



could write in his *Journal* that the one condition of those who wanted to join his United Society of Believers was "a desire to flee from the wrath to come, to be saved from [the consequences of] their sins."[11] His form of assurance was an immediate revelation of God's love and favor. "Converted" while hearing Luther's preface to his commentary on Romans and deeply influenced by English Puritanism, Wesley nevertheless found both the Lutheran and the Puritan answer to the question "How can I be sure God loves me?" unsatisfying. Nothing less than a direct, unmediated communication from the Holy Spirit would do.

At the time I delivered my talk, I described my approach as that of a helicopter cruising over two and a half centuries of Christian history, swooping down at just a few representative points to take pictures for later analysis. I have since complicated my metaphor, imagining the history of Christian theology as an undersea flow of lava. Forced up from the sea floor by the movement of enormous tectonic plates, the flow slowly forms a vast undersea mountain range. Once in a while, that mountain range breaks the surface of the ocean, and its uppermost parts, islands in an atoll, become visible. My helicopter swoops down on just those visible parts. Most of the movement is occurring out of sight, but the few points the pilot is able to observe give him clues to the progress of the largely invisible range.[12]

*Inward Baptism*, the result of my further research and thinking on this issue, devotes a chapter to each of six of these more "visible" points. In chapter 1, the reader will encounter the great indulgence campaigns of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The practice of granting indulgences—perceived abuses of which generated Luther's *Theses*—was tied closely to the sacrament of penance, so a close look at indulgences can uncover the assumptions behind a religiosity that provided access to God through a sacramental system and an ordained priesthood.

Chapter 2 will describe Luther's critique of that religiosity, concentrating particularly on his understanding of infant baptism. While a legitimate sacrament in Luther's eyes, infant baptism appears to coexist uneasily with his insistence that justification must occur through the instrumentality of faith.

[11] *Journal* VII: 389, cited in Gordon Rupp, *Religion in England 1688–1791* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), p. 389.

[12] Like most analogies, this one has its flaws, most noticeably that careful historical analysis—such as that in Douglas Winiarski's *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017)—can illuminate territory that was previously "underwater."

Although it focuses on only a single day during a late-sixteenth-century confrontation between Lutheran and Reformed theologians, chapter 3 exposes the crux of my argument. As each side argued for its understanding of the meaning of infant baptism, each side fastened on a different part of Luther's teaching. As the theologians argued, the distinction between the traditional understanding of sacramental baptism and something else, an "inward baptism," became clear. Commitment to an inward baptism, which appeared to the Reformed to be a necessary consequence of Luther's teaching, would eventually make evangelicalism possible.

Chapter 4 moves to England to examine the "conscience theology" of the Puritan William Perkins. I will be the first to admit that I use Perkins as a stand-in for countless of his Puritan colleagues, but I contend that it was he who developed a practical theology that they all, in one form or another, appropriated.[13] To read Perkins's many treatises is to see the encounter between divine and human shifting from the sacraments to the human heart.

Chapter 5, by necessity, is a kind of catch-up chapter, covering more than a century between Perkins's death in 1602 and George Whitefield's first New England missionary tour in 1740. I look at the theology of three representative figures—Richard Baxter, Richard Allestree, and Richard Alleine—each of whom offered a particular theological option after the Restoration of Charles II in 1660. During this period of time, my helicopter pilot would have noticed a pervasive tendency to conflate religion and morality.

In chapter 6, we finally reach the leaders of the evangelical awakening in the British Isles, George Whitefield and John Wesley. Both insisted that by preaching the "immediate" revelation of the Holy Spirit during the "new birth," they were recovering an essential element of primitive Christianity that had been forgotten over the centuries. Both had clear affinities with the conscience theology of William Perkins, yet both distanced themselves from it in important ways. In New England, Jonathan Edwards explored the nature of religious experience more deeply than either Wesley or Whitefield had

[13] The theology that contemporaries and subsequent historians have called Puritan took many forms; rather than reifying an entity called Puritanism and imagining that individual thinkers did or did not subscribe to its tenets, I base my arguments here on the enormously influential writings of Perkins. It was Perkins's painstaking analysis of "inward baptism" that captured the attention of contemporaries and focused it on the interior testimony of the Holy Spirit on individual believers. For a magisterial summary of the vicissitudes of Puritanism in New England and the British Isles, see David D. Hall, *The Puritans: A Transatlantic History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).



done, and Edwards proudly claimed his Puritan heritage even as opponents found him deviating from it.

I am all too aware that, with the exception of chapter 4, I am tackling subjects about which other scholars know far more than I ever will. But I trust that by following a theme through the disparate circumstances of these six chapters—rather than offering startling new discoveries about any of them—I can make a contribution to everyone's understanding of an enormously consequential development in the history of Christianity.

## Some Practical Considerations

With the term *evangelicalism*, I here confine myself to the religious movement that took its start with the great evangelical revivals of the late 1730s and 1740s in Britain and America. I do not try to describe developments in the history of evangelicalism after the mid-eighteenth century, let alone comment on evangelicalism today. In defining evangelicalism in this way, I follow the lead of Johns Hopkins historian Timothy Smith, who wrote that Wesley and Whitefield "together were largely responsible for setting the course that popular evangelicalism has followed to the present time."[14]

Except in cases where a direct quotation forces a different decision, I use female pronouns when I am referring to lay worshipers. This is both to counteract the almost exclusive use of male pronouns in my sources and also because women were probably the majority of church members through much of this period.

All biblical citations use the 1611 Authorized Version (King James Version with modernized spelling), except where expressly indicated. I also modernize the spellings in other quotations from pre-modern sources.

While I hope to reach a broader audience in the text, I have observed the usual scholarly conventions in the footnotes for readers who wish to know the authorities on which I rely.

[14] Timothy Smith, "Introduction: George Whitefield and the Wesleyan Witness," in Timothy Smith, ed., *Whitefield and Wesley on the New Birth*, by George Whitefield and John Wesley (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), p. 7.