

Nils J. Engelsen's Baptismal Theology: A Norwegian Baptist Response to Emil Brunner and Karl Barth

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Abstract

This article examines how the baptismal theologies of Emil Brunner and Karl Barth generated renewed mid-twentieth-century debate and how their influence shaped Nils J. Engelsen's constructive theological synthesis. Brunner's emphasis on the divine–human encounter and personal correspondence, together with Barth's christological grounding of baptism and their shared critique of infant baptism, catalysed fresh reflection across Europe. These discussions resonated strongly within Nordic Baptist contexts, where questions of ecclesial identity, discipleship, and the meaning of baptism were particularly acute in predominantly Lutheran cultures. Engelsen's description of baptism as a 'relational symbol' represents a distinctively Norwegian Baptist response to these wider theological developments. By integrating Brunner's personalism with Barth's christocentrism and prophetic symbolism, he articulates a theology of believers' baptism that affirms both divine agency and human response, offering valuable insight for contemporary Baptist reflection on the triune God's agency within the realm of the sacramental practices of the church.

Keywords

Believers' baptism; personal correspondence; prophetic symbolism

Introduction

The resurgence of baptistic sacramentalist theological reflection concerning believers' baptism cannot be understood apart from the theological discussions that took place in the mid-twentieth century, inspired by the Swiss Reformed theologians Emil Brunner (1889–1966) and Karl Barth (1886–1968). Their respective works, Brunner's *Wahrheit*

als Begegnung (*The Divine–Human Encounter*,¹ 1938; expanded as *Truth as Encounter*,² 1964) and Barth's lecture *Die kirchliche Lehre von der Taufe* (*The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*,³ delivered in 1943 and published in 1948) ignited what Anthony R. Cross has described as 'the modern baptismal debate'.⁴ Their influence extended far beyond their own Reformed contexts, inspiring discussions among Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, and Baptists.⁵ Brunner and Barth's works also generated the inspiration for Nordic Baptist theologians to reconsider and to articulate their convictions concerning baptism and faith at that time.

This resulted in two Nordic Baptist theological conferences: Vällersvik (1953) and Stenungsön (1956). These gatherings brought together leading Baptist theologians from Sweden, Denmark, and Norway to reassess the meaning and practice of baptism in light of these theological contributions. The Stenungsön conference resulted in the publication of *Dopet, Dåben, Dåpen* (1957), including papers by scholars Torsten Bergsten from Sweden and Kjell Kyrø-Rasmussen from Denmark, and by Norwegian scholar Nils J. Engelsen.⁶ While each contribution was significant, Engelsen's work proved especially formative for Norwegian Baptist theology and practice. Engelsen's work must be read as a response to the works of Brunner and Barth, and as a foundation for how he further develops his personal theological views on believers' baptism.

This article begins by examining Brunner's theology of encounter and personal correspondence, before turning to Barth's christological grounding of baptism. It then considers their influence on Engelsen's further constructive synthesis, arguing that his theology of baptism as a 'relational symbol' provides a contextual framework for

¹ Emil Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter* (SCM, 1943).

² Emil Brunner, *Truth as Encounter* (Westminster Press, 1964).

³ Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* (SCM Press, 1948).

⁴ Anthony R. Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Paternoster Press, 2000), p. 127.

⁵ *Christian Baptism*, ed. by A. Gilmore (Lutterworth, 1959), pp. 15–24.

⁶ Torsten Bergsten, Kjell Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Nils J. Engelsen, *Dopet - Dåben - Dåpen: Tre Nordiska Teologiska Uppsatser* (Ernst Westerberg, 1957).

understanding believers' baptism within the Norwegian Baptist tradition.

The early twentieth century saw growing dissatisfaction with both the optimism of liberal Protestantism and the rigidities of confessional orthodoxy. Neo-orthodoxy, represented in different ways by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, sought to recover the primacy of divine revelation, the centrality of Christ, and the necessity of a conscious human response of faith. Engelsen's reflections were shaped by these developments, yet his response constitutes a distinctive and creative Norwegian Baptist contribution, attentive to the particular challenges of Baptist life in Norway.

Brunner's work, *The Divine–Human Encounter* was based on the Olaus Petri lectures at Uppsala University in 1938. His claim that truth is not an object to be grasped but an event of encounter between God and the human person had far-reaching implications for his theology, including his understanding of baptism. In likeness with Brunner, Barth offered a sharp critique of the practice of infant baptism, but with a strong emphasis on baptism as the subjective human response to God's prior act of grace in Jesus Christ.

Despite their differing emphases, both theologians insisted that baptism must be understood within the dynamic relationship between divine initiative and human response. This convergence resonated strongly with Baptists, who emphasised personal faith as essential for baptism, salvation, and church membership. At the same time, Brunner and Barth challenged Baptists to articulate more clearly the theological grounding of their convictions, particularly regarding the gracious agency of God within the baptismal event.

In Scandinavia, where the Lutheran heritage and state church structures shaped religious and cultural life, the question of baptism was particularly important. Infant baptism functioned not only as a theological practice but also as a cultural and civic institution tied to citizenship, national identity, and social belonging.

It is within this context that Nils J. Engelsen's contribution must be understood. As a Norwegian Baptist theologian, Engelsen sought to

articulate a theology of baptism that was faithful to Scripture, informed by contemporary theology, and responsive to the Norwegian Baptist context. His work demonstrates a careful engagement with Brunner and Barth, yet it is not derivative. Engelsen appropriates their insights in a distinctively Baptist manner, emphasising the relational, symbolic, and prophetic symbolic dimensions of baptism.

Accordingly, this article first examines Brunner's theology of encounter and personal correspondence, and the implications of these for his theology of baptism. It then explores Barth's evolving theology of baptism, from his early sacramental realism to his later emphasis on baptism as the human response to divine grace. Finally, it turns to Engelsen, whose synthesis offers a contribution to the theology of believers' baptism within the Norwegian Baptist tradition.

Emil Brunner

Emil Brunner (1889–1966) stands as one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century Protestant theology, and his contribution to the modern baptismal debate cannot be overstated. Brunner's central claim, that truth is not an object to be grasped but an event of encounter between God and human beings provided a conceptual framework for reconsidering the theology and practice of baptism within the church.

Brunner's theology is deeply rooted in the tradition of dialectical theology, yet it bears a distinctive personalist character shaped by the influence of Søren Kierkegaard, Ferdinand Ebner, and Martin Buber. As Mark J. McInroy notes, dialogical personalism rests on the belief that 'the human being is constituted in encounter with another [...] the "I" is in an important sense incomplete without another, the "Thou"'.⁷ This emphasis on relationality permeates Brunner's theology, informing his understanding of all aspects of Christian doctrine.

At the heart of Brunner's theology lies the conviction that God reveals himself not through abstract propositions or metaphysical

⁷ Mark J. McInroy, 'Karl Barth and Personalist Philosophy: A Critical Appropriation', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 1.64 (2011), pp. 45–63 (p. 47).

systems but through personal encounter. Revelation is an event in which God addresses the human person, thereby calling forth a response of faith. In his *Dogmatics*, Brunner argues that the early church did not distinguish between *fides qua creditur* (the faith by which one believes) and *fides quae creditur* (the faith that one believes), because true faith is always both trust and confession, obedience and belief.⁸ Brunner therefore rejects the object–subject antithesis, which he regards as a distortion introduced by Greek philosophy. He stated, “The Biblical understanding of truth cannot be grasped through the Object-Subject antithesis, on the contrary it is falsified through it.”⁹

For Brunner, the object–subject antithesis reduces revelation either to an objective deposit of doctrinal propositions (objectivism) or to a subjective religious experience (subjectivism). Both approaches fail to capture the relational character of biblical revelation, which is grounded in God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ and the human response of obedient faith.

This relational understanding of revelation leads Brunner to describe the divine–human relationship as ‘*personal correspondence*’.¹⁰ The Word of God awakens faith, and faith expresses itself in trusting obedience. This correspondence is not a symmetrical relationship between equals, but a relationship grounded in God’s gracious initiative and human free response. God’s self-disclosure is always an act of love (*agapē*), and the human response is always an act of obedience-in-trust (*pistis*).¹¹

Brunner’s understanding of faith is central to his theology of baptism. Drawing on the New Testament, he describes faith (*pistis*) as an act that involves the whole person: mind, will, and affections. Faith is ‘obedience in trust’,¹² an act in which the human person responds to God’s self-giving love. This obedience is not coerced, because it arises from the freedom that God grants to humanity. ‘An encounter takes

⁸ Emil Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation: Dogmatics*, III (Lutterworth Press, 1964), p. 135.

⁹ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 21.

¹⁰ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 66.

¹¹ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, pp. 70–71.

¹² Brunner, *Dogmatics*, III, p. 161.

place between God and man,' Brunner writes, 'While God is coming to meet man, He also makes possible man's going to meet Him.'¹³

Faith is therefore both dependence and freedom. It is dependence because the human person relies entirely on God's grace; it is freedom because this dependence is freely chosen. Brunner rejects any notion of faith that reduces it to either mere intellectual assent or emotional experience, claiming that faith is a relational act that binds the believer to Christ and incorporates them into the fellowship of the church.¹⁴

Brunner's theology cannot be understood apart from recognising the influence of dialogical personalists. Søren Kierkegaard's critique of objectivism and his emphasis on the subjective appropriation of truth provided Brunner with a framework for challenging the object–subject antithesis. While Karl Barth initially drew on Kierkegaard in his early work, he later distanced himself from what he perceived as Kierkegaard's anthropocentric subjectivism. Brunner, however, embraced Kierkegaard's insights more fully, integrating them into his theology of revelation and faith.¹⁵

Ferdinand Ebner and Martin Buber further shaped Brunner's relational anthropology. Buber's distinction between the 'I–It' and 'I–Thou' modes of existence offered Brunner a conceptual vocabulary for articulating the relational character of revelation. In the 'I–It' relation, the other is objectified and held at a distance; in the 'I–Thou' relation, the other is encountered in freedom and reciprocity. For Brunner, genuine knowledge of God belongs to the sphere of 'I–Thou', where God addresses the human person and calls forth a response of faith.¹⁶

¹³ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 74.

¹⁴ Cynthia Bennett Brown, 'The Personal Imperative of Revelation: Emil Brunner, Dogmatics and Theological Existence', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 65.4 (2012), pp. 421–434 (p.434).

¹⁵ Curtis L. Thompson, 'Emil Brunner: Polemically Promoting Kierkegaard's Christian Philosophy of Encounter', in *Volume 10, Tome I: Kierkegaard's Influence on Theology: German Protestant Theology*, ed. by Jon Stewart, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception, and Resources (Taylor & Francis, 2016), pp. 65–103 (p. 73).

¹⁶ Brunner, *Truth as Encounter*, pp. 19–39.

Brunner applies Buber's relational categories to ecclesiology and sacramental theology, arguing that the church and its practices must reflect the relational character of divine revelation. Brunner's relational theology has crucial implications for his understanding of baptism. For Brunner, baptism is not merely a ritual act of commitment or a sacramental impartation of salvific grace; it is a relational event in which God and the believer meet in personal correspondence. Baptism involves both God's gracious act of regeneration, forgiveness, and cleansing, *and* the believer's active response of faith, confession, and identification with Christ.¹⁷

Brunner therefore insists that baptism must be a two-sided event. 'Baptism is not merely a gift to man,' he writes, 'but also an active receiving and confession on the part of man.'¹⁸ This reciprocity is essential to the meaning of baptism. If baptism is separated from personal faith, the relational correspondence is broken, and the rite becomes an empty ritual. This emphasis on the relational character of believers' baptism was later reflected in George Beasley-Murray's description of it as the 'trysting place of the sinner with his Saviour'.¹⁹

This leads Brunner to a sharp critique of infant baptism. He argues that infant baptism disrupts the unity of faith and baptism by separating the act of baptism from a person's conscious response. The Reformed principle *nullum sacramentum sine fide* (no sacrament without faith) is violated when baptism is administered to those who are incapable of conscious faith.²⁰

Brunner further argues that the practice of infant baptism has contributed to the institutionalisation of the church and the blurring of the distinction between the church and the world. He notes that many who have been baptised as infants later reject the faith, leading him to ask the question:

¹⁷ Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 181.

¹⁸ Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 178.

¹⁹ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (Macmillan, 1966), p. 41.

²⁰ Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 179–180.

What does the fact of having been baptised mean for the large number of contemporary people who do not know and do not even care to know whether they have been baptised?²¹

He concludes that 'the contemporary practice of infant baptism can hardly be regarded as being anything short of scandalous'.²²

Brunner's critique of infant baptism and his emphasis on personal faith resonated strongly with Baptists, who had long insisted on the necessity of a personal confession of faith as the basis for baptism and regenerate church membership. Brunner's insistence that baptism must be an expression of personal correspondence between God and the believer aligns closely with the Baptist conviction that baptism is the outward expression of an inward faith.

At the same time, Brunner's emphasis on the communal and relational dimensions of faith challenges overly individualistic interpretations of baptism. Baptism is not merely a personal testimony but an act that incorporates the believer into the church. He states,

Indeed, baptism, precisely as this free confession of man, is the stipulation for the individual's joining the Church. Baptism is not only an act of grace, but just as much an act of confession stemming from the act of grace.²³

Brunner thus offers a corrective to both sacramental objectivism and revivalist subjectivism, providing a balanced account of baptism as a relational event grounded in God's grace and expressed in the human response of faith.

Karl Barth

Karl Barth (1886–1968) exerted an equally significant influence on the modern baptismal debate. Although Barth and Brunner diverged sharply on several doctrinal issues, not least natural theology, their respective treatments of baptism share a common concern: the need to recover the dynamic relationship between divine grace and human response in the act. Barth's theology of baptism developed over several

²¹ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 181.

²² Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 183.

²³ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 178.

decades, from his early reflections in *Der Römerbrief* (1919; 1922) to his 1943 lecture *Die kirchliche Lehre von der Taufe* (*The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, published in 1948), and finally to the fragmentary but important treatment in *Church Dogmatics IV/4* (1967). Across these works, Barth's thought displays both continuity and development, but the central thread remains clear: baptism is grounded entirely in the free, sovereign act of Jesus Christ.

Barth's earliest reflections on baptism appear in the first and second editions of *Der Römerbrief*. Here, Barth stands firmly within the Reformed sacramental tradition, drawing on Calvin's definition of a sacrament as 'a visible sign of a sacred thing, or a visible form of an invisible grace'.²⁴ For the younger Barth, baptism is a human act performed within the life of the church, yet its meaning and power derive entirely from the gracious act of God in Christ that it signifies, stating that baptism 'carries no power other than that generated by the graceful act of God in Christ that it represents'.²⁵

Barth denies attributing to baptism any independent salvific efficacy, believing that baptism is sacramental only in the sense that it is a sign and seal of God's grace, not a channel of grace in its own right. 'Like all the Church's acts', Barth insists, baptism is 'plainly a human act', yet as part of the church's proclamation it is also 'a free word and act of Jesus Christ himself'.²⁶ This reflects Barth's broader understanding of the church's ministry as a witness to the objective reality of God's saving work in Christ.

Barth's early sacramental theology thus emphasises the absolute sovereignty of Christ in the impartation of grace. The sacrament does not effect salvation; it bears witness to the salvation already accomplished in Christ. Therefore, God's gracious salvific intent is not dependent upon baptism, but rather revealed and realised in the power of Jesus Christ which is 'the only power in baptism'.²⁷ He further

²⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.14.1, online version, reformed.org <<https://reformed.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Calvin-Institutes-of-Christian-Religion.pdf>> [accessed 28 May 2026], p. 779.

²⁵ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 16.

²⁶ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 17.

²⁷ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 23.

reiterates this, stating, 'And let us remember that the power of baptism lies in the free word and deed of Jesus Christ. Our baptism is no more the cause of our redemption than is our faith.'²⁸

Barth develops this theme further by describing baptism as a 'seal' (*obsignare*) of Christ's saving work. Drawing on Pauline language, he argues that baptism functions as the divine confirmation of the salvation already given in Christ and received in faith. 'In baptism,' Barth writes, 'Jesus Christ seals the letter He has written in His person and with His work and which we by faith in Him have already received.'²⁹ Barth's emphasis on baptism as 'seal' is based on his conviction that it is the visible sign of the invisible *nativitas spiritualis*, the new birth that occurs through the Holy Spirit.³⁰ This then provides Barth with a foundation for employing the strong sacramental language of the New Testament, noting that Baptism 'saves', 'sanctifies', 'purifies', 'mediates forgiveness', and 'effects new birth', while continually maintaining that these effects belong to Christ's work, not to the rite itself.³¹ The significance of baptism is entirely derivative of Christ's saving work. The sacrament does not add anything to Christ's work; it bears witness to it. This christocentric grounding distinguishes Barth's approach from both sacramental objectivism and revivalist subjectivism. Baptism is neither a magical rite nor a merely human testimony; it is a symbolic act in which Christ himself is the true agent.

A central feature of Barth's baptismal theology is his interpretation of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. For Barth, this event is not merely an historical precursor to Christian baptism but the theological foundation of the practice. Jesus's baptism signifies his identification with sinners and anticipates his death and resurrection. In submitting to baptism, Jesus takes upon himself the burden of human sin and inaugurates the covenant of grace.³²

²⁸ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 27.

²⁹ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, pp. 29–30.

³⁰ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 11.

³¹ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 19.

³² Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, pp. 17–18.

Barth argues that Jesus's baptism is paradigmatic for believers. Just as Jesus identified with sinners in his baptism, so believers identify with Christ in theirs. Baptism becomes 'a living and expressive representation of Christ's high-priestly death and resurrection'.³³ The believer, in being baptised, participates symbolically in Christ's death to sin and new life in God (Rom 6:1–11). This participation is not merely metaphorical; it marks a decisive transition of allegiance, a turning from the old life of sin to the new life of obedience.

Barth's interpretation of Romans 6 is particularly significant. He insists that baptism signifies not only the forgiveness of sins but the death of the sinner. 'Not only his sins and he not only in his character as a sinner, but really, he himself as a subject, met his death then and there.'³⁴ Baptism thus marks the end of the old self and the beginning of a new existence in Christ. This existential transformation emphasises the ethical and moral implications of baptism which Barth later describes as the believer's 'coming of age' for mature Christian discipleship.³⁵

Barth also emphasises the eschatological dimension of baptism. Baptism stands at the centre of the believer's existence, pointing both backwards to the forgiveness of sins and forwards to a life of obedience and hope. It is a sign of the believer's incorporation into the church and their participation in the coming kingdom of God. As Barth writes, baptism 'has its full honour in being the most living and expressive picture of that history: the visible sign of the invisible *nativitas spiritualis* at the entrance gate of the Church and at the beginning of every Christian life'.³⁶

This eschatological orientation reinforces the ethical dimension of baptism. The believer is not only assured of God's grace but placed

³³ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 18.

³⁴ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 11.

³⁵ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4: (Fragment) The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (T&T Clark International, 2004), p. x.

³⁶ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 11.

under divine obligation. Baptism is both gift and command, assurance and commission. It marks the beginning of a life lived in service to God and in witness to the coming reign of Christ.

Barth's emphasis on the free human response to God's grace leads him to a critical stance toward infant baptism. While he does not deny the possibility of divine grace operating in the lives of infants, he insists that baptism, as a human act of obedience, requires the conscious participation of the one being baptised. It requires the 'responsible willingness and readiness of the baptised person to receive the promise of grace directed towards him and to be party to the pledge of allegiance concerning the graceful service demanded of him'.³⁷ An infant, Barth argues, cannot fulfil this requirement. The infant is a passive recipient (*Behandelter*), not an active partner (*Handelnder*). Baptism administered without the conscious faith of the baptised is therefore '*not correct*'.³⁸ Barth's critique is not merely practical but theological. Infant baptism obscures the essential structure of grace and response that baptism is meant to embody. It risks reducing baptism to a magical rite or a cultural convention, detached from the personal faith that provides it meaning.

Barth's perspectives on baptism evolved throughout the course of his career and seemed to take a dramatic turn (what he called a 'reorientation') towards the end of his life.³⁹ He distanced himself from his earlier work on baptism, indicating that his changes in perspective were largely due to the inspiration of his son Markus Barth, who convinced him to assume a non-sacramental view of baptism through the exegetical conclusions found in his work *Die Taufe – Ein Sakrament?* from 1951.⁴⁰ Barth's later views on baptism are seen by most as a radical departure from his early perspectives, but there are others who, while

³⁷ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 40.

³⁸ Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 41. Italics original.

³⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, p. x.

⁴⁰ Markus Barth, *Die Taufe- Ein Sakrament?: Ein Exegetischer Beitrag Zum Gespräch Über Die Kirchliche Taufe* (Evangelischer Verlag, 1951).

still acknowledging some major changes in his views, still consider his final word on the subject to be truly faithful to the full scope of his theology.⁴¹

In his later theology of baptism, Karl Barth argues for the absolute sovereignty of divine agency in conversion and salvation thereby marking a distinction between Spirit baptism and water baptism. The turning of the human person toward God in faith is, for Barth, an event grounded wholly in God's free and unconditional act of grace; it is God alone who awakens faith, creates obedience, and brings the believer into the sphere of reconciliation.⁴² Within this framework, water baptism assumes the character of a subjective human act, a responsive act of obedience, commitment, and embodied prayer, that arises only because God has previously acted decisively in Christ. Because salvation rests entirely on Christ's death and resurrection, the human act of baptism can only be a petition that God's prior act of grace be made effective in the believer.⁴³ Baptism therefore possesses no independent salvific efficacy but is the believer's response to the divine initiative, bearing with it a lifelong ethical commitment to the cause of Christ. It becomes thereby a public act made possible and motivated solely by the prior work of grace.⁴⁴ Barth therefore presents baptism not as a means of grace but as the believer's public testimony to the spiritual regeneration worked in their prior conversion, and as an ethical consequence of God's reconciling work.⁴⁵

This stands in marked contrast to Emil Brunner, who, while affirming the primacy of divine revelation and grace, places greater emphasis on the relational reciprocity between God and the human

⁴¹ Daniel Migliore, 'Reforming the Theology and Practice of Baptism: The Challenge of Karl Barth', in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, ed. by David Willis and Michael Welker (Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 494–511 (p. 499). Migliore emphasises that all views on baptism have their basis in a particular theological context. He comments, 'What Barth says about baptism in CD IV/4 is a key to the intention of the whole of the Church Dogmatics: to affirm the sovereign grace of God in Jesus Christ as the basis and goal of true human freedom in partnership with God' (p.499).

⁴² Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, p. 72.

⁴³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, pp. 210–211.

⁴⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, p. 73.

⁴⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, p. 106.

person. In *The Divine–Human Encounter*, Brunner describes the meeting between God and the believer in baptism as a genuine I–Thou event, in which the human response is not merely the ethical consequence of divine action but an essential element of the encounter itself. Brunner explains as follows:

In baptism it is God first and Sovereign who acts, who forgives sin, who cleanses man and regenerates him. But man too acts in baptism. He allows his cleansing of himself to take place. He lets himself to be drawn into the death of Christ. He confesses his faith and his attachment to Christ. Baptism is not merely a gift to men, but also an act of receiving and confession on the part of man.⁴⁶

Brunner further states that

baptism is the point of transition from the death of the old man to new being and life in Christ. Thus the act of baptism as such was simply regarded as one with the inner event, so that it might appear that without the act of baptism this inner event could not take place.⁴⁷

Thus, Brunner emphasises the sacramental efficacy of baptism when accompanied by conscious faith.

Brunner and Barth's works provided a robust theological grounding for believers' baptism. Consequently, their influence on the Nordic Baptist context was considerable. Their critique of infant baptism resonated strongly in a region where Lutheran state church structures had long tied baptism to citizenship and cultural identity. Barth's later emphasis on the ethical consequences of salvation and water baptism called attention to the necessity of commitment to the missional task of the church. However, this unfortunately reinforced a non-sacramental interpretation of believers' baptism, something Barth himself termed 'Neo-Zwinglian',⁴⁸ thereby placing an undue emphasis on the believer's subjective act of obedience and ethical resolve within baptism, while not acknowledging it as a means of grace.

Brunner, by contrast, understood baptism as the concrete sphere in which the regenerative, personal encounter between the triune

⁴⁶ Brunner, *The Divine–Human Encounter*, p. 178.

⁴⁷ Brunner, *The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation: Dogmatics*, III, p. 53.

⁴⁸ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV.4*, p. 130.

God and the believer becomes visible and enacted. While he firmly rejected any notion of automatic sacramental efficacy, he nevertheless retained a genuinely sacramental understanding of baptism as the God-appointed form in which divine grace is imparted when God's saving initiative meets human faith and obedience.

Nils J. Engelsen: Relational Symbol and Prophetic Enactment

Engelsen's most significant theological influence among Norwegian Baptists was exercised through his long tenure as rector of the Norwegian Baptist Theological Seminary, a position he held from 1950 to 1985. Although his published writings are limited in scope, his formative impact on generations of ministers was substantial, shaped through decades of teaching, institutional leadership, and pastoral formation. His influence was further extended through his extensive participation in both national and international ecumenical dialogue processes.⁴⁹

While Brunner and Barth provided the broader theological framework for renewed reflection on baptism, Engelsen's unique contribution lies in his account of baptism as a 'relational symbol', which he understood as a symbolic act that not only signifies but also enacts the relationship between God and the believer.⁵⁰

Engelsen provided a response to the works of Brunner and Barth while serving as a Baptist theologian within a predominantly Lutheran state church context. The practice of infant baptism was deeply embedded in Norwegian society, tied not only to church affiliation but also to cultural and civic identity. His paper at Stenungsön,⁵¹ later supplemented by his essay 'The Meaning of

⁴⁹ Peder A. Eidberg and Tarald Rasmussen, 'Nils Johan Engelsen', *Store norske leksikon* <https://snl.no/Nils_Johan_Engelsen> [accessed 8 May 2026].

⁵⁰ Nils J. Engelsen, 'Dåpens Mening', *Baptist: Tidsskrift for Baptistisk Historie, Teologi Og Praksis*, 1.18 (2014), pp. 3–15 (p. 14).

⁵¹ Bergsten, Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Dåben - Dâpen*.

Baptism',⁵² indicates that he was fully conversant with contemporary theological currents yet firmly rooted in the Norwegian Baptist tradition.

Engelsen's response to Brunner and Barth centred on the relationship between baptism and faith. Here Engelsen largely reiterates Brunner's view of saving faith as the human response to the divine revelation of the Word,⁵³ thereby concluding that 'faith is an act that must encompass all of one's personality'.⁵⁴ At the same time, Engelsen addresses the theological differences between Baptist and Lutheran baptismal practice.⁵⁵ The requirement of a conscious faith response in those being baptised was, and still remains, the main obstacle to consensus with traditions practising infant baptism, which was an issue Engelsen engaged directly and vigorously:

In the New Testament sense of the word, faith is of course something one seeks in vain in an infant. Its personality exists only in potential form, also in the religious sense. If infant baptism had not become an ingrained practice that needed defending, it is unlikely that anyone would have thought to reduce faith to impersonal helplessness, nature-bound passivity, instinctive capacity for nourishment, and so on, as we now sometimes hear.⁵⁶

Engelsen further presents the central concept in his theology of baptism which fully embraces Brunner's presentation of baptism as a manifestation of 'the divine-human encounter'. However, being fully conscious of the context from which he is responding, he chooses to avoid any description of baptism as 'sacramental'.⁵⁷ While fully incorporating Brunner's emphasis upon 'personal correspondence',⁵⁸ he chooses rather to define baptism as a '*relational symbol*'.⁵⁹ Drawing on Brunner's personalism and Barth's christocentrism, Engelsen argues

⁵² Engelsen, 'Dåpens Mening'.

⁵³ Brunner, *The Divine Human Encounter*, pp. 66–77.

⁵⁴ Bergsten, Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Dåben - Dåpen*, pp. 52–62.

⁵⁵ Bergsten, Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Dåben - Dåpen*, pp. 55–61.

⁵⁶ Bergsten, Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Dåben - Dåpen*, p. 62.

⁵⁷ In the Scandinavian context at the time of Engelsen's response, the words 'sacrament' and 'sacramental' carried negative associations for Baptists because they were viewed as referring to an *ex opere operato* view of what they chose to describe as 'ordinances'.

⁵⁸ Engelsen, 'Dåpens Mening'.

⁵⁹ Engelsen, 'Dåpens Mening', pp. 13–15.

that baptism is not merely a sign that points to an external reality but a symbolic action that both participates in, and enacts that reality. A relational symbol is a symbolic act that both creates and expresses relationship.

Engelsen illustrates this through two analogies: the raising of a flag and the human embrace. The raising of a flag does not merely symbolise allegiance; it enacts it. The act of hoisting the flag is itself a declaration of loyalty and identity. Similarly, an embrace does not merely *signify* love and affection; it *performs* love and affection in the giving and receiving of an embrace. Both actions are symbolic, yet their symbolic character is inseparable from the relational reality they bring into being.⁶⁰

Engelsen applies this logic to baptism. Baptism is a symbolic act, but not merely a representation of an inward reality. It is a prophetic enactment; a performative gesture in which the believer publicly enacts repentance, faith, and union with Christ, and in which God works forgiveness, cleansing, and incorporation into the *ekklesia*. The symbol and the reality are not identical, but they are inseparably bound in the relational event.⁶¹ He stated,

In believers' baptism, salvation is 'set in motion' for the candidate that is baptised. The work of Christ is actualised for the individual. It is in light of this act, that the life that follows must be viewed and lived. Salvation is initiated and will be completed in the coming of Christ. As the prophetic acts initiated and 'created' the future, baptism 'initiates' the life of salvation.⁶²

This understanding allows Engelsen to affirm both the divine and human dimensions of baptism without collapsing one into the other. Baptism is neither a purely divine act nor a purely human testimony. It is a relational symbol in which God and the believer meet in personal correspondence. Although Engelsen does not cite him, it seems likely that his perspectives were derived from H. Wheeler Robinson's description of the character of prophetic enactment in the

⁶⁰ Tor Egil Mikalsen, 'Dåpen Som Relasjonssymbol: Et Viktig Bidrag i Nils J. Engelsen's Teologi', *Seminariets Venner*, 15.1 (1991), no page numbers.

⁶¹ Engelsen, 'Dåpens Mening', p. 13.

⁶² Bergsten, Kyrö-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Døben - Dâpen*, p. 58.

Old Testament. When relating this concept to the sacramental realism of believers' baptism, Robinson asserts,

There can no charge of Sacramental 'Magic', for the baptised person is a conscious believer, and the efficacy of the rite depends on his conscious and believing participation in it. But equally, there can be no question of mere symbolism for the act is the partial and fragmentary, but very real accomplishment of a divine work, the work of the Holy Spirit.⁶³

Similarly, George Beasley-Murray also refers to the concept of 'prophetic symbolism' in relation to the baptism of John. In building upon Robinson's insights, Beasley-Murray states that 'the chief element in that outlook would be the belief that the word of the Lord can be performed as well as spoken, and that such prophetic action has sacramental character'.⁶⁴

While Engelsen's perspectives are not fully original, his account of baptism as relational symbol enables him to hold together the two concerns that dominated the modern baptismal debate: the primacy of divine grace and the necessity of a personal response of faith. On the one hand, baptism requires personal faith because the relational symbol cannot be enacted without the believer's conscious participation. Just as one cannot be truly embraced without consenting to the embrace, so baptism cannot fulfil its symbolic function without the believer's voluntary confession of Christ. In this respect, Engelsen stands with Brunner in insisting that infant baptism disrupts the unity of faith and baptism by severing the relational reciprocity that the symbol requires.

In this way Engelsen also maintains that baptism is fundamentally grounded in the agency of God. The believer's action is always secondary to God's prior act of grace. In the baptismal event, God acts to forgive, cleanse, and incorporate; the believer acts to

⁶³ H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit* (Nisbet & Co., 1928), pp. 192–194 (quotation p. 194). See also H. Wheeler Robinson, *Inspiration and Revelation in the Old Testament* (Clarendon Press, 1946), pp. 35–36, 185, 227. George Beasley-Murray later refers to the concept of prophetic symbolism in relation to the baptism of John. George R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1962), p. 43.

⁶⁴ Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament*, p. 43.

confess, surrender, and follow. The relational symbol thus preserves both divine initiative and human response without reducing baptism to either a magical rite or a mere human testimony.

Engelsen's synthesis reflects a careful reading of both Brunner and Barth. He affirms Barth's insistence that Christ is the true agent in baptism, and in likeness with Brunner he also emphasises the necessity of the believer's free response. Baptism is the event in which the believer's personal correspondence with God is enacted in a real symbolic act that is both divine and human. While not describing baptism as a sacramental act, the underlying concept of symbolic realism attributes it with sacramental efficacy.

Engelsen's baptismal theology anticipated several themes later developed by Baptist sacramentalist theologians.⁶⁵ He moved beyond the symbolic confessionalism typically associated with Baptist practice in his context by presenting baptism as a relational and prophetic symbol in which divine and human action converge. Although later Baptist sacramentalist theologians offered more systematic accounts, Engelsen demonstrates that Nordic Baptists were already engaging, and in some respects anticipating, this wider conversation. Engelsen's emphasis on baptism as a 'relational symbol' demonstrates that a sacramental retrieval of believers' baptism was already emerging among Scandinavian Baptist theologians influenced by Karl Barth and Emil Brunner.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ His work in the mid-1950s pre-dated R. E. O. White's *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1960), George Beasley-Murray's *Baptism in the New Testament* (Eerdmans, 1962) and *Baptism Today and Tomorrow* (Macmillan, 1966), as well as Alec Gilmore's edited volumes on baptism (*Christian Baptism* (Lutterworth, 1959); *Baptism and Christian Unity* (Lutterworth, 1967)). This later development is evident in the work of Anthony R. Cross, Paul S. Fiddes, John Colwell, Stanley Fowler, Philip E. Thompson, among many others, who variously emphasise baptism as a means of grace, participation in the triune life, incorporation into the church, and a transformative act of discipleship.

⁶⁶ This was also evidenced in the works of the contributors to Bergsten, Kyrø-Rasmussen, and Engelsen, *Døpet - Dåben - Däpen*.

Conclusion

In comparing the perspectives of Brunner, Barth, and Engelsen one notes both similarities and differences that characterised the discussions and debates concerning baptism in the mid-twentieth century.

All three theologians emphasise the relational character of baptism. For Brunner, baptism is the manifestation of personal correspondence between God and the believer. For Barth, baptism is the believer's participation in Christ's death and resurrection and a confessional act of commitment. For Engelsen, baptism is a real relational symbol that enacts and manifests the divine-human relationship. Through presenting baptism as a relational symbol, Engelsen both avoids the use of sacramental terminology that would hinder its reception, while presenting it as an act that carries with it salvific efficacy as a means of grace when performed in faith. His approach provides a theological framework that is both faithful to Baptist convictions, while also incorporating the perspectives of Brunner and Barth in his work.

All three also insist on the necessity of personal faith. Brunner repudiates the practice of infant baptism because it separates baptism from conscious faith. Barth critiques infant baptism because it lacks the responsible maturity required for baptism. Engelsen argues that the relational symbol cannot be enacted without the believer's voluntary participation.

Despite these similarities, there are significant differences. Brunner's theology is grounded in personalism and emphasises the relational character of revelation. Barth's theology is grounded in Christology and emphasises the objective reality of Christ's saving work. Engelsen synthesises these approaches, integrating Brunner's relational personalism with Barth's christocentric focus and Robinson's application of prophetic symbolism.

Engelsen's distinctive contribution lies in his development of the relational symbol, which allows him to affirm both the divine and human dimensions of baptism without collapsing one into the other. His synthesis provides a constructive alternative to both sacramental

objectivism and revivalist subjectivism. His theology affirms the primacy of divine grace while emphasising the necessity of human response while recognising believers' baptism as a symbolic act with sacramental realism. This balanced approach offers a robust theological grounding for Baptist practice in a context where infant baptism remains the dominant ecclesial norm.

Finally, Engelsen's approach also challenges overly individualistic interpretations of baptism. Baptism is not merely a private decision but a public act that binds the believer to the community of faith. The relational symbol also emphasises the communal dimension of baptism, reminding Baptists that faith is always lived in fellowship with others.

The modern baptismal debate, initiated by the works of Emil Brunner and Karl Barth, provided the theological impetus for renewed reflection on baptism within the Nordic Baptist context. Brunner's emphasis on divine-human encounter and personal correspondence, and Barth's insistence on Christ's sovereign agency and the ethical commitment of baptism, challenged Baptists to articulate more clearly the theological grounding of their convictions and practices.

Nils J. Engelsen's contribution represents a significant voice in this development. Like Brunner, Engelsen emphasised the necessity of the conscious human response of faith to the self-disclosure of God in Christ within the context of believers' baptism. However, he deliberately avoided sacramental terminology that Norwegian Baptists associated with the practice of infant baptism, which allowed him to affirm the dynamic reciprocity of the divine-human encounter without invoking sacramental categories that he knew carried unhelpful theological baggage.

Engelsen further developed this relational account by drawing on the prophetic symbolism of the Old Testament. He argued that symbolic actions performed by the prophets were not merely illustrative but instrumental in effecting the reality they signified. In a similar way, believers' baptism functions as a prophetic and relational act that enacts and effectuates the believer's participation in the life of the triune God. For Engelsen, baptism is therefore not simply a public confession of

faith but a symbolic act through which God brings about spiritual regeneration, forgiveness, and incorporation into the church. Consequently, his theology of baptism as relational symbol provides a theological framework that is both faithful to Baptist convictions and responsive to the theological concerns of his contemporaries.

Nils J. Engelsen's work in the mid-1950s pre-dated the major British Baptist contributions that would later shape the resurgence of Baptist sacramental reflection. Within the Norwegian Baptist context, believers' baptism had historically been regarded primarily as a symbolic and confessional act, an outward testimony to an inward spiritual transformation believed to have occurred at conversion. Yet the theological discussions stimulated by the works of Emil Brunner and Karl Barth prompted a significant re-examination of this assumption. Their emphasis on the relational and participatory dimensions of faith encouraged Baptist theologians to reconsider the salvific efficacy of believers' baptism when performed in faith. Increasingly, a consensus has emerged among many Baptist scholars that a purely symbolic and confessional interpretation of baptism is neither theologically adequate nor biblically warranted. In this respect, Engelsen stands among a diverse group of Baptist theologians across Europe and North America who, from the mid-twentieth century, have re-evaluated the relationship between divine agency, symbolic action, and ecclesiological identity.

Engelsen's work thus represents an important early Nordic voice within the broader retrieval of Baptist sacramental theology that has since developed within Baptist theology.