



Baptism, Evangelism, and Being Church

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While on a trip, my wife and I stopped at a restaurant for lunch. Four women at a nearby table were conversing animatedly. When I sensed they were talking about religious things, I tuned in, and my ears perked up. Baptism was the topic. Evidently parents were resisting baptizing their child, but were feeling the pressure of grandparents who were concerned that the baby should be baptized. One of the women apparently agreed with the grandparents and reported that she told the parents, “I think you should have the child baptized. It won’t do any harm if you do!” Compare that to Aidan Kavanagh’s rhetorical description of baptism:

For when we talk about confirmation our conversation is really about baptism; when we are dealing with baptism we are discoursing about Christian initiation; when we are into initiation we are face to face with conversion in Jesus Christ dead and rising; and when we are into conversion in Jesus Christ dead and rising we are at the storm center of the universe.¹

The one view apparently does not expect much to happen at baptism, but the other description suggests that we run for shelter or look for an ark. The ways we practice baptism in our congregations (application) also communicates how we

¹Aidan Kavanagh, *Made, Not Born: New Perspectives on Christian Initiation and the Catechumenate* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1976) 2.

understand and interpret baptism in our situation.² Our liturgies are embodied theology and events of the gospel.³ In this essay I wish to explore a few selected practices within the event of baptism and discuss what they say about how we understand being church and our evangelical mission.

I. BAPTISM: GOD’S SACRAMENT OF EVANGELICAL OUTREACH

Because infant baptism has become the norm in most of our congregations, we may have inadvertently lost the outward missionary thrust of baptism. Jesus made baptism a sacrament of conversion, a missionary sacrament, when he mandated his church to “go...make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them...” (Matt 28:19-20). Peter’s Pentecost preaching provoked this question: “What shall we do?” and the pointed response was: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”

(Acts 2:37-38). Baptism is what God does when the Spirit provokes repentance through the preaching of the gospel promise. The inbreaking storm of the royal rule of God in Christ Jesus catches us up into God's promised future. In this action each person is made a citizen of this new community ruled by the one who is given all authority in heaven and on earth, and the old citizenship is renounced. It is like dying and being raised from the dead, being born anew, passing from darkness to light, once being no people and now being God's people.

Martin Luther rhapsodizes about baptism's benefits:

In Baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and to practice all his life. He always has enough to do to believe firmly what Baptism promises and brings—victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God's grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with his gifts. In short, the blessings of Baptism are so boundless that if timid nature considers them, it may well doubt whether they could all be true.⁴

One of my students told how her four-year old nephew echoed Luther's praise of baptism's benefits. As the water was still dripping from his infant sister's head, four-year-old Christopher's raspy voice filled the sanctuary, "That was absolutely amazing!"⁵

If indeed we believe these absolutely amazing things which the Bible and theology say about the promises of baptism and baptism's role in the mission of God for the whole world, then those promises and perspectives will shape how

²What we do in liturgy matters because it is an event of the gospel on which theology reflects. See Mons A. Teig, *Liturgy as Fusion of Horizons: A Hermeneutical Approach Based on Hans-Georg Gadamer's Theory of Application* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1992).

³Two books which argue this perspective cogently and carefully are Gerhard O. Forde's *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) and Robert W. Jenson's *Visible Words: The Interpretation and Practice of Christian Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

⁴*The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959) 441-442.

⁵This was related to me by the Rev. Laurie Natwick who now serves as one of the pastors at Sharon Lutheran Church in Grand Forks, ND.

baptisms are done and how pastors and congregation prepare for this threatening and saving flood. Such a significant gospel event in God's saving mission deserves robust and significant celebration so the promise of God is seen and heard, experienced and believed, once done and forever remembered.

If baptism is part of the missionary Spirit's plunging us into the depths of Christ's death for the world and raising us to newness of life in the risen Christ as part of the dawning of the new creation, then this suggests baptisms be more than a quiet "in-house," ho-hum event. Perhaps a newspaper ad and write-up should highlight coming baptisms. In Milwaukee last Easter the local paper carried a story about nearly 150 East Asians who were baptized at a local church's Easter Vigil service; people must still be talking about that service of baptism! The focus of baptism on the gospel and the central events of the church's faith celebrated at Easter, Pentecost, and the Baptism of our Lord have suggested that congregations arrange for baptismal festivals on these days.

This view enlarges the focus of baptism and the image of the church from pastoral care to evangelical outreach and participation in the eschatological mission of God in Christ. But if even this short summary of the meaning of baptism is to be unpacked for baptismal candidates, parents of unbaptized children, and the baptized who have not entered Luther's rhapsody or four-year old Christopher's amazement, we need to do more teaching about the gift and benefit of baptism. It may be important to ask how much instruction congregations provide for baptismal candidates, sponsors, and parents, both before and after the event of baptism. Here we might listen to our sisters and brothers in the Catholic Church as they involve many people in the parish, not just the priest, in the process of prayer, Bible study, talking about the Christian life and faith as they prepare for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA).

Further, this instruction participates in the gospel promise of baptism: "You shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." In some places this teaching of the Spirit and gift of new life in baptism led some early church people to call it simply "illumination."⁶ Thus the baptismal candle lighted from the paschal candle and given to the newly baptized has a symbolic insight that is more than an exhortation to witness or ethical living: "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."⁷ The Holy Spirit promised in baptism is an essential aspect of the gospel which "is the 'sacrament' of the future."⁸

⁶James F. White, *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretive Sources* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992) 147. From Justin Martyr's *First Apology* (c. 155): "This washing is called illumination, since those who learn these things are illumined within."

⁷*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1978) 124.

⁸Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977) 219. Moltmann goes on to assert, "in its very character as the proclamation of Christ the gospel is the revelation of the divine future; and the actual *fact* of this happening must be termed the presence of the Holy Spirit" (220).

II. BAPTISM: BEING CHURCH

The mission of God embodied in baptism initiates the individual into Christ, that is, into the Spirit-empowered body of Christ that we call the church. Significant biblical passages are worth quoting here. St. Paul is acutely aware of the individual's unique gifts and attributes, but he also stresses the social or community reality of what God gives in baptism.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body...and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:12-13)

Despite obvious and important differences in sex, ethnicity, and economic or social status, baptism gives a gift which can recognize those differences but will not allow them to be divisive. So the apostle Paul again says,

For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female;

for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:26-28)

Baptism is about being church, not simply baptized individuals who only voluntarily choose associations with “a” church. Church is not voluntary; it is part of what it means to be baptized. Therefore, when we talk about and do baptisms, we must also talk about what baptism means for being church and what being church means for responsible baptismal practice. While Jürgen Moltmann is discussing the European state church and its implications for baptismal practice, his correlation of church and baptism is a task for us as well. He says,

Baptism can only be practiced in accordance with its proper meaning if the church’s public form and function in society is altered at the same time, and if the church becomes recognizable and active as the messianic fellowship of Christ. A convincing baptismal practice can only be acquired together with a convincing church.⁹

Here we are back to the importance of practice or application in this event of the gospel on which theology reflects, or if one prefers, embodied theology or theological application. While variety in practice can occur, just as variety occurs in theological formulation, it makes a great deal of difference how effectively and fully that application or practice serves the gospel. James White, an important North American liturgical scholar, underlines this principle:

This appropriation of the riches of baptism applies to practice just as it does to theological reflection....Without the active participation of a congregation, the whole image of incorporation is dissipated. The sealing of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:3) needs the sign of anointing or laying on of hands. These are not peripheral matters but important pastoral matters for giving expression to what God does in baptism. What is done will inevitably shape what is believed about baptism.¹⁰

⁹Ibid., 232.

¹⁰James F. White, *Sacraments as God's Self Giving: Sacramental Practice and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983) 42.

In response to the preceding discussion of baptism and being church, I want to discuss implications of practice or application especially in regard to the liturgies in *Lutheran Book of Worship* and the companion *Occasional Services*.

An example of practice which dissipates the biblical examples and experiencing the reality of incorporation into Christ would be “private baptisms.” Actually, in the light of the above discussion, this is a contradiction in terms. How can the reality of baptism into Christ, of belonging to one another, be communicated when we dismiss the worshiping congregation as if they do not have a stake in this event? This is true even if baptism is held immediately after the worship service. While Protestants have been very critical about the “private mass,” they need to evaluate their practice of private baptism and its suggestion that baptism is individual and private rather than corporate and public.

This practice, prevalent in the past throughout the denominations, tended to load most if

not all of the responsibility on parents. Therefore, sometimes we have asked if we can responsibly baptize infants if we have serious doubts about the parents' resolve to teach the children and worship with them. If we dismiss the congregation, then we say in our ritual that the parents have the responsibility while the dismissed congregation does not. Regardless of the responsibility we might claim for the congregation, ritually it is all delegated to the pastor.

In the *Book of Common Prayer* of the U.S.A. Episcopal Church, the gathered congregation is asked, "Will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons in their life in Christ?"¹¹ The United Methodists have included several questions/charges and responses/commitments for the congregation. The pastor asks the congregation: "Will you nurture one another in the Christian faith and life and include these persons now before you in your care?" The congregation responds in unison:

With God's help we will proclaim the good news and live according to the example of Christ. We will surround these persons with a community of love and forgiveness, that they may grow in their trust of God, and be found faithful in their service to others. We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.¹²

While other congregational responses are provided in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, perhaps something along the above lines would challenge the congregation to see their responsibility for the baptized. Instead of loading all the responsibility on the parents, perhaps we should ask if congregations are willing to shoulder their proper responsibilities for the newly baptized persons initiated into the local expression of the body of Christ.

The congregation's importance in baptism and the public nature of this sacrament are addressed in the Lutheran rite titled "Baptism in Emergency" or

¹¹*The Book of Common Prayer (Proposed)* (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation and the Seabury Press, 1977) 303.

¹²*The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989) 35. Two additional pledges of responsibility for the baptized persons are provided on page 44 of this hymnal.

what in the past we may have called a private baptism or emergency baptism. The instructions suggest that if a person survives, then they be brought into the congregation for a "Public Recognition of the Baptism."¹³ This does what non-emergency "private baptisms" neglect to do.

All the recent baptismal liturgies of the various churches assume the presence of the congregation and often include places for congregational involvement such as a welcome to share the life and mission of Christ. Baptism is clearly a time for the gathered community to affirm the promise and continuing process of their own baptisms.

Two items in *Lutheran Book of Worship* could be more effectively and imaginatively utilized to proclaim the significance of baptism. The first action is the giving of the baptismal candle, lighted from the paschal candle, with the words of Jesus about letting our light shine. The past habitual practice put all the "lead" roles in the mouth and action of the pastor, so many pastors fail to notice or implement the rubric which suggests that "a representative of the congregation" do this.¹⁴ Instead of utilizing the nearest acolyte or lay assisting minister, pastors

should think about using a symbolic person for this action. If the candidate for baptism is an adult, perhaps a member of the evangelism committee should be assigned this task. If an infant is baptized, then the “representative of the congregation” might represent the congregation’s ongoing promise to teach the newly baptized person(s). The Sunday school superintendent or a Sunday school teacher might be regularly assigned this task so that they even memorize the verse and can address the candidates without a book in hand. But for this to have its effect, one would need to make it a regular pattern and give some explanation in the bulletin.

The second place a clearly ritual and representative role for the congregation is provided occurs at the welcome of the newly baptized person(s) into the family of priests and prophets. Again, in many instances pastors either ignore or have not imagined the great possibilities in what appears to be a small part in the baptismal event. Again, the instructions suggest that a “representative of the congregation” do this, not the pastor or an assistant pastor.¹⁵ (Larger congregations with several pastors tend to neglect lay representatives even more than smaller congregations.) Why make the effort to do this? It is a way to emphasize the mission and vocation of baptism shared by all the baptized. Do not simply grab the closest lay person. Allow this act to be ritually and theologically representative. One might expand the duties of the elected officers or church council to include the welcome at baptisms. To help make this clear to the congregation, one could put in the bulletin or announce verbally that Mary or Ken Davis, the president of the congregation, will welcome the newly baptized into the congregation. The whole congregation then joins their representative in extending the welcome.

¹³*Occasional Services* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, Lutheran Church in America, 1982) 17.

¹⁴*LBW*, 124 (rubric 16).

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 124 (rubric 18).

Here we can join our thinking about baptism as evangelical outreach with a notion of baptism as something that breaks individual isolation, placing us in Christ—in the eschatological community of the Spirit who is sent from the Father. This understanding challenges the idea that in baptism we receive Christ or accept Christ. It is rather that we are baptized into Christ where God accepts us and puts us in new community opened by the Spirit. This perspective sees faith as essential but as a gift. Here we are never “only children” but always placed in a diverse, varied, and strange family.

This essay has sought to provoke imagination and a review of the present practice and theology of baptism. More teaching for our time, like that accomplished by Luther in his Large and Small Catechisms, will be needed as we seek to anchor the Christian understanding and practice of baptism to this contemporary situation’s shoal.

III. BAPTISM’S DAILY DIP

Theologically we say that baptism is a once-in-a-lifetime event that has profound daily implications. Martin Luther suggested that we return daily to our baptism because there in Christ’s death and resurrection we find the grace and identity to live as people of God. My personal ritual reminder of whose I am and the source for living the day in the power of Christ’s Spirit is to dip my hand in the water of the daily shower and retrace the sign of the cross over my

body as was done one day long ago by a pastor at my baptism.

This identity is essential for the self-confidence of the baptized in their vocation and mission. Too often we hear, “Oh, I cannot do that. I’m only a lay person.” If we have this baptismal identity and promise strongly in our minds, then I do not think we will hear many people say, “Oh, I can’t do that. I am only baptized.” Our task is to move people beyond a negative definition of themselves to what they are because of their inheritance in baptism.

On Sunday mornings the ritual remembrance of this profound reality in our lives can be made by having the pastor do the confession and absolution from the baptismal font. In *LBW* the service starts with the formula by which we are baptized, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” If we took the covers off the fonts and filled them with water, the pastor could dip her hand in the water and make the sign of the cross over herself or over the congregation. Retracing the sign over herself invites the worshipers to retrace the sign made over their bodies by a pastor at their own baptism. In a real sense, this is the “birth mark” of baptism. If some people are uncomfortable, introduce this act during a fitting season of the church year—one example would be the Lenten season when we preach Christ crucified and prepare people for baptisms at Easter. By doing the order of confession and forgiveness from the baptismal font—no matter where the font is located—one could ritually and experientially help people relate baptism to daily dying to sin by repentance and rising to newness of life through faith’s trust in the risen Christ’s offer of forgiveness.

In our daily return to the word of promise in our baptism, we will be

page 35

reminded not only that “I *was* baptized,” but that “I *am* baptized.” This amazing promise is a public witness and invitation to the world to share in the communal life of the Spirit and the birthing travails of the powers and grace of God’s kingdom, announced and promised in Jesus Christ.

This daily dip continues until death when as Luther suggests we are finally sunk deep in our baptism, and all that baptism signifies now comes to pass. That is the promise we live by every day and the promise we proclaim to the world.

I hope I never lose four-year-old Christopher’s awe over this word in the water: “That’s absolutely amazing!”

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