



Pastoral Decisions in the Hard Cases

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For generations baptism was regularly pushed to the margins of Sunday worship and often practiced in a way that diminished its significance. That state of affairs is changing. Since the publication of the *Lutheran Book of Worship* and other ecumenical resources for baptism, pastors now have better tools at hand for making changes that affirm baptism as the church's primal sacrament. The good news is that these changes could very well lead to a more responsible practice of baptism, a deepened reverence for the grace of God, and a more intentional, missional community of faith. The bad news is that they are still changes, and as such they can be disquieting, disturbing, and distressing to people we love and want to assure.

This article will explore the tension between pastor as change agent and pastor as caregiver in the practice of holy baptism. Special concern will be focused on those "hard cases" that so often defy our policies and challenge even our best pastoral wisdom. What response do we make to the Archie and Edith Bunkers who come bearing their grandchildren to us to baptize without the consent of the parents? What conditions call for an "emergency baptism"? What balance do we strike between meeting people where they are and calling people to the new obedience? How can we minister to individuals while being responsible to the entire people of God? Where, when, and how does theology help or hinder our pastoral decision-making?

I. A BAPTISMAL RENAISSANCE

The church continues to be blessed with a renaissance of baptismal theology. Over the last generation biblical, historical, and systematic theologians have been steadily expanding the church's appreciation of the gift of baptism. The liturgical movement has sought ways to translate this baptismal theology into appropriate ritual, and ecumenical dialogue has drawn upon all this scholarship to produce a growing consensus on baptism that many hail as miraculous.

For the parish pastor this renewal of baptismal theology forbids the celebration of baptism "as an insipid, cute, rosebud of an affair all full of kisses and talk that 'God loves you and we love you.'"¹ Not that the baptismal renaissance makes the sacrament any less an occasion of profound joy, or that theology automatically supplants pastoral judgment, but as theology heartily proclaims the devastating grace of God in baptism, whatever is casual or careless in a pastor's practice of baptism comes under serious judgment.

Whether pastors ever really administered baptism as "an insipid, cute, rosebud of an affair," the renewed emphasis on baptism's mind-blowing implications has provoked yet more guilt in the already guilt-filled hearts and souls of many clergy. The very act of sealing a person in the Holy Spirit and marking him or her with the cross of Christ forever would and should give

anyone pause, and pastors are pausing.

Theology's impact on the celebration of baptism is not, however, confined only to pastors or to the theologically inclined. The church catholic is experiencing a renewed interest in the sacrament of initiation. Through effective preaching and more deliberate teaching on baptism, people in the pews are also gaining in their regard for both the gift of the sacrament and for the stewardship that attends the gift. As "stewards of God's mysteries" (1 Cor 4:1), pastors and congregations alike are striving for aright administration that means much more than reciting the right formula at the right time. In the interests of truly hallowing baptism, fonts are being hauled out of corners, worship committees are sifting through planning guides, and many congregations are groping toward an authentic baptismal discipline.

II. AN EMERGING DISCIPLINE, PERSISTING QUESTIONS

By way of baptism the church has not legislated standards of conduct for its practice. What the church has done is propagate a list of "shoulds" and "are to's" that amount to a significant agenda for pastoral and congregational action. In response to theology's proclamation, a biblical, confessional discipline for the practice of baptism is emerging and gaining consensus, and keeping not a few pastors up at night.

In its general rubrics for Holy Baptism, the *Lutheran Book of Worship* alone generates enough "shoulds" and "are to's" to constitute a substantial program of

¹William Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986) 148.

pastoral care and education. In the twelve rubrics included in the *Ministers Desk Edition*, three areas of emphasis stand out as central to the emerging baptismal discipline; trying to bring this discipline to bear is making heavy demands on pastors and congregations striving to baptize with good conscience and faithful integrity.

1. The first component of baptismal discipline concerns admission to the sacrament.

Candidates for Holy Baptism are infants born to members of the congregation or those for whom members assume the responsibility of nurture, and older persons who, after adequate preparation and instruction, declare their faith in Jesus Christ and their desire for Baptism.²

In other words, infant baptism is not indiscriminate baptism, and theologians are quick to add that it was never intended to be. By specifying that among the candidates for baptism are "infants born to members of the congregation," the LBW indicates that the pastor is not obligated to baptize all comers.

While this directive gives the pastor some basis for exercising spiritual discernment, membership is by no means any guarantee that parents are bringing their children to the font in good faith and holy reverence. Church rolls abound with members whom pastors fondly hope, wish, and pray to involve in the life of Christ's body. Should the pastor baptize the child of inactive members without first calling them to repentance and renewal of their own baptism? Should the baptism of the child be deferred until the parents assume true membership, and not just membership in name only? Or, should the baptism proceed as prelude to the parents'

renewal, and what if such repentance and renewal are not forthcoming?

Provision is made for the baptism of infants or children without parental support. Those infants and children for whom members of the congregation assume the responsibility for nurture may also be baptized. Member friends and family are often more than eager and willing to assume this noble task—sometimes too eager. What about the members who present for baptism their out-of-state, in-town-for-the-holidays grandchild (or niece, or nephew, or college roommate’s husband’s child from a previous marriage)? Even after hearing their obligation to bring them to the services of God’s house, teach them the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments, place in their hands the Holy Scripture and provide for their instruction in the Christian faith, these brave souls can, will, and do promise, fully conscious that their spiritual charge will be living thousands of miles away with no congregation of nurture to call their own. What then?

The case of adults seeking baptism would appear more straightforward. At least they can speak for themselves, confess their own faith, and express their own desire for the sacrament. The *Lutheran Book of Worship*, however, further specifies that these older persons seeking baptism are candidates “after adequate prepara-

²*Lutheran Book of Worship: Ministers Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983) 30.

tion and instruction.” In the case of both infants and older persons, the issue of instruction is inseparable from the concern for admission to the sacrament and is another issue for pastoral concern.

2. Concern for instruction recurs in several of the *Lutheran Book of Worship*’s directives concerning baptismal discipline. In addition to the reference to instruction of older candidates for admission to the sacrament, the LBW further specifies that baptism should be arranged well in advance to discuss the meaning of baptism with parents and sponsors and that sponsors should accompany older candidates through the instruction period.³

This concern for instruction echoes a cry from across the church for a renewed catechumenate. Following Robert Webber’s *Celebrating Our Faith: Evangelism through Worship*, Patrick Keifert outlines a program of liturgical evangelism that incorporates an intense period of instruction within an enveloping sequence of rituals culminating in baptism and continuing nurture in the church.⁴ Robert Jenson proposes a (Lenten) catechumenate in which candidates for baptism are trained in the “moral dissensus between late modernity and the gospel.” “Such instruction,” he adds, “is meaningless outside the practice of prayer and reflection: the catechumens must meet daily for worship, discussion, and meditation.” Jenson further notes, “Those embarking on Christian parenthood should submit to the same deliberately rigorous and lengthy course as adult catechumens, with additional practical help for home prayer and instruction of children.”⁵ The LBW *Occasional Services* presents a three stage preparation for baptism beginning with inquirers’ class, proceeding to ritual enrollment, and thirdly, leading up to baptism, providing direction in “the practice of life according to the Gospel (including service to the poor and neglected); encouragement and instruction in the life of prayer; and basic instruction in Christian understandings about God, human relationships, and the meaning of life.”⁶

To these worthy authorities many pastors might respond with a question “ Cheers”

character Frasier Crane once put to fellow character Cliff Clavin—“What color is the sky in your world?” Of course, candidates for baptism need more intensive training in ways Christian, along with their sponsors and the parents of children to be baptized and the children’s sponsors. Most certainly, congregations ask far too little of their prospective members, and all too often get it. Without a doubt, clergy owe it to their members new and old to instruct them in the chasm that separates the way the gospel defines the good and how the world sees it. Sometimes, though, a pastor must count it a major success just to get their members to turn off the TV long enough for a brief visit about their baby’s baptism.

The *Lutheran Book of Worship* enjoins pastors to give candidates, and im-

³Ibid.

⁴Patrick R. Keifert, *Welcoming the Stranger; A Public Theology of Worship and Evangelism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1992) 100-107.

⁵Robert W. Jenson, *Visible Words; The Interpretation and Practice of the Sacraments* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 167.

⁶*Occasional Services: A Companion to Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1983) 15.

page 40

plicitly their sponsors and parents as well, “adequate instruction,” but what is adequate? How many sessions constitute adequate? And what about missed sessions? Should there be excused absences for work, or illness, or family emergencies? Dr. Jenson argues, “Those who are irregular, or show no growth of insight, must not be baptized.”⁷ But what if a pastor’s beloved predecessor only required a little chat, or the neighboring parish does its catechumenate on a Saturday morning after brunch, or the regional megachurch simply asks people to come forward on the last hymn? When are pastors preparing candidates for baptism, and when are pastors just creating hoops for people to jump through? Parents, sponsors, and candidates must indeed be competent to make the solemn promises sworn to in baptism. That competence is impossible without rigorous instruction, and rigorous instruction requires the support of the total community. The role of community in baptism constitutes the third component of a contemporary baptismal discipline, and a third arena for pastoral decision-making.

3. Community figures prominently in the emerging baptismal discipline. The *Lutheran Book of Worship* explicitly states:

Baptism should be celebrated within the chief service of the congregation. When extraordinary circumstances require Baptism at other times, a public announcement should be made at the service the following Sunday.⁸

Underlining this emphasis on community the LBW further suggests that, rather than celebrate baptism every few Sundays, a program of baptismal festivals be instituted to heighten focus on the sacrament of Christian initiation.

The emphasis on community involvement is entirely compatible with the nature of the sacrament. Incorporation into the body of Christ calls for the body to be present in the fullest possible way. A mother needs to be present for the delivery of her child; mother church needs to be present for the spiritual delivery of her newborn. Further, only under the most extraordinary of circumstances should the people of God be deprived of an opportunity to be reminded of and

reaffirmed in their baptism into Christ. Exactly what constitutes an extraordinary circumstance is another matter for pastoral decision-making.

The health crisis occasions the most obvious, if not the most common call for baptism outside of congregational worship. The LBW *Occasional Services* provides a form for baptism in an emergency and notes that any baptized person may administer the sacrament when a pastor is not available. Before such an emergency baptism is administered, however, the pastor owes it to the parents, or in the case of an older person, the candidate and their family, to explain that baptism is not magic, that it does not insure physical healing, and that the rite itself does not make a person righteous before God.

If a child dies before the pastor or anyone else administers baptism, should baptism be administered to the dead, or stillborn, or miscarried child? Concern for the grieving parents will be uppermost in every pastor's mind, but that concern

⁷Jenson, *Visible Words*, 167.

⁸*Lutheran Book of Worship: Ministers Desk Edition*, 30.

must also be balanced with a view to the integrity of the sacrament and with a concern that the parents turn their grief to the God of infinite grace. Baptizing the dead child may only reinforce a magical understanding of the sacrament and a small, mean image of God.

In the event that a concerned hospital worker should administer the sacrament to an infant or child before consulting with the parents, the pastor may assure them that baptism with water in the name of the Holy Trinity is valid and upon the child's recovery will be recognized in public worship. If parents continue to doubt the validity of their child's baptism, or if in later years an older person has doubts about having been properly baptized, *The Book of Common Prayer* offers a formula for conditional baptism: "If you are not already baptized, N., I baptize you in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."⁹ Rebaptism is not an option. The Word of God in baptism is not to be compromised or called into question.

The more common and frequently more difficult requests for private baptism often have less to do with health crises or terrified consciences and much more with the dates when sponsors will be in town or when people¹⁰ have to arrange their flights to get the supersaver rates. Also common are requests for private baptisms to avoid embarrassment. Many adult candidates for baptism feel awkward coming forward for baptism when they perceive from congregational practice and font size that infant baptism is the norm. Likewise, when children are born out of wedlock, a parent, or more commonly grandparents may ask that the baptism be less public than good baptismal discipline would suggest. In either of these latter cases effective pastoral care of the individuals must accompany reforms within the larger congregation. The baptism of adults and older children can no longer be seen as aberrations, and a start might be made with the provision of a baptistry appropriate for both adults and children. Likewise, only as the community grows in its own self-definition as a community of forgiven sinners will sinners come seeking forgiveness.

Even when the request for baptism outside the context of Sunday worship appears trivial or inappropriate, close attention to the dynamics of the family system is still in order. Edwin Friedman notes, "Life-cycle ceremonies capture the healing processes of therapeutic encounter better than any other form of religious experience."¹⁰ A baptism often gathers families in ways

many of those in the system would have considered impossible. The potential for healing inherent in such gatherings must be weighed in the balance with concern for healthy baptismal discipline.

III. CONTINUING IN THE WAY FORWARD

What's at stake in the proper administration of baptism is not rubrics or

⁹*The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1977) 313.

¹⁰Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford, 1985) 162.

liturgical correctness. What's at stake is discipleship that demands discipline, because in the final analysis "baptism without Church discipline" is cheap grace.¹¹

The temptation to cheapen grace is ever-present, and the history of baptismal practice demonstrates the power of such temptation. Spiritual discernment in admission to the sacrament, a renewed and renewing catechumenate, and corporate involvement in the practice of baptism declined over many centuries. Restoring them will continue to be the tasks of pastors and congregations certainly for the remainder of this generation and likely well into the next.

As the church strives to recover the vigor and rigor of evangelical baptism, the church's leaders are taking people where they are, or even where they've been allowed to wander, and gently, lovingly leading them to where the gospel calls. From all corners and expressions of the church, thoughtful, concerted teaching is beginning to erode the widely held magical view of baptism. Wherever and whenever possible pastors and congregations are encouraging, if not insisting on, the participation of the whole body of Christ in the sacrament. Private baptisms are going the way of private masses. Parish education is coming to mean more than just getting people to go to classes.

Theology has offered a vision of how to practice baptism in away that fits what baptism is. That vision comprehends a discipline which is both enticing and challenging. The pursuit of this vision is beginning with pastors and congregations, and its further implementation will mean broadening the discussion to include neighboring churches and area clusters of congregations. The day may yet come when synod assemblies will exercise themselves over the meaning of baptism as intentionally and forcefully as they debate the budget. One hopes and prays.

¹¹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1949) 38.

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