



## **We Trust the Holy Signature: The Significance of Baptism in Recent Pastoral Practice**

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### I. A NEW SCENE

At the beginning of Martin E. Marty's perennially popular book *Baptism*<sup>1</sup> there are two dramatic sketches, each describing a prototypical baptismal service. The first delineates the rite as it might have looked in the early church, complete with colorful details that could have accompanied the apostolic tradition of Hippolytus. The second scene is a drier description of a baptism that might have taken place in North America in the early 1960s, when the book was first published. While admitting that the second ceremony was a certainly a valid baptism, the author gave the impression that this rite, devoid of drama and mystery and somewhat removed from a called and gathered community, represented a thinning out of the great tradition. Some pastors with long memories will admit that this second scene was pretty close to the way things really were three decades ago when the Protestant tradition in the twentieth Christian century still held sway.

That Protestant tradition has all but washed away in the intervening years, causing relief for some and regret to many. The last reprinting of Marty's book was in 1977. If he were to reissue his book today, in addition to making the language

<sup>1</sup>Martin E. Marty, *Baptism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1962) 1-5.

more inclusive, he might include a third baptismal scene. A liturgical renewal that has sailed in the wake of the now departed Protestant tradition has elevated baptism to a new prominence in the life of many worshiping communities.

In this contemporary scene the sacrament might occur in the midst of a service of Holy Communion on a Sunday morning. It might transpire during an Easter Vigil or at one of several designated baptismal festivals throughout the year. There would likely be hymns and flowing water. There might even be oil imposed and a small baptismal candle lighted from a larger paschal candle. Little children from the congregation could be invited to look on along with sponsors and family. The gathered congregation would likely join in the creed and a brief liturgy of welcome.

Other rituals might also distinguish today's baptismal rite from that of a generation ago. There might be a procession from font to altar. The sermon for the day might emphasize baptism in the life of the community. Aspects of the liturgy, like the rite of confession and the sacrament

of holy communion, might be closely linked with the baptism. All in all, it is a markedly different picture from that of the early 1960s.

While today's rite does not return to apostolic practice, neither is it the drier Protestant ritual. The more recent picture derives from an emerging liturgical tradition which has reshaped both the practice and place of baptism in the life of the church. This emerging tradition has also reshaped the role of the minister in liturgical practice and pastoral counseling even though some of the changes remain more in the realm of the possible than the actual. We will take note of some of the recent changes which have redrawn the picture of baptism in the life of the church. Then we will examine several ways in which the role of pastoral leadership has been influenced and changed by the recent conversation about baptism. Finally, we will evaluate what, if anything, has truly changed for those who have been baptized in the name of the triune God as a result of this conversation.

## II. REDRAWING THE PICTURE OF BAPTISM

Since about 1975 liturgical renewal and revival of hymnody have inspired a proliferation of hymnals and liturgical materials. This rising tide has swept up pastors and people in the American church and has profoundly restructured many practices in the parish. If we were to sketch that third picture of baptism in the light of these new developments, then we would find ourselves also redrawing the scene for holy communion and for occasional services like confirmation, marriage, and burial. Significant changes have taken place in hymnody as well.

Many of these changes have in some measure been brought about because of changing perspectives on baptism. True, baptism has always been recognized as a seminal action in the life of a believer. But, as Marty's second picture implies, in the Protestant tradition it had become a separate act performed in a discreet manner and generally not made much of thereafter. For the most part baptism was a happy event for a family get-together, complete with refreshments and picture-taking in the back yard. In spite of the best intentions on the part of pastors, the subject of

baptism was not usually brought up again, except passingly in Sunday school. Confirmation classes raised the matter briefly because it was in the catechisms. But it was earnestly considered again only when the child, now grown and married, set things in motion for their own offspring to be baptized. Pastoral care and instruction with regard to baptism were governed by the ebb and flow of this pattern.

In the mid 1970s this pattern in American church life began to change. The change was brought about by the aforementioned liturgical renewal in conjunction with various ecumenical conversations prompted by Vatican II. It also reflected the deep need of the church to define itself and its identity in an increasingly secular society. These forces have wrought far-reaching changes in American church life—not least in matters deriving from the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is now regarded as central to church life and practice.

For Lutherans the publication of *Lutheran Book of Worship* in 1978 brought baptism into high relief. In the introduction to that new hymnal there is a thumbnail history of predecessor bodies and their worship books. Noting that *Lutheran Book of Worship* is the most recent confluence of these streams, an affirmation about baptism is made: "An examination of the contents [of LBW] will reveal the several goals toward which the Commission worked in liturgy:

to restore to Holy Baptism the liturgical rank and dignity implied by Lutheran theology, and to draw out the baptismal motifs in such acts as the confession of sin and the burial of the dead.”<sup>2</sup>

Statements like this one gradually began to bear fruit in pastoral leadership. In my own experience the first fruit came as something of an epiphany when I realized that conducting the Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness could be done from the font, thus indeed dramatizing the link between baptism and confession. On another occasion, during an Easter season, I found myself instinctively lighting the paschal candle for a funeral. The less official but still influential *Manual on the Liturgy* underscored the propriety of this act which I had discovered almost by accident. “The Burial of the Dead is an Easter liturgy. It has its focus in Baptism by which one is made a child of God forever and is dramatized in the Easter Vigil and its celebration of the passage through death to new life, where Christ has led the way.”<sup>3</sup> Pursuing the extensive references to baptism in the index of the *Manual* is an enlightening exercise.<sup>4</sup> One comes away with an appreciation of the centrality of baptism in current Lutheran theology and the importance of the sacrament as a fountainhead for the liturgy.

This appreciation is strengthened by pondering and singing the hymns listed under the section “Holy Baptism” in LBW. The number of baptismal hymns in LBW is more than double that in the previous Lutheran *Service Book and Hymnal*. Some hymns are as rich and sturdy as “I Bind unto Myself Today,” while others are

<sup>2</sup>*Lutheran Book of Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg; Philadelphia: Board of Publication, LCA, 1978) 7.

<sup>3</sup>Philip H. Pfatteicher and Carlos R. Messerli, *Manual on the Liturgy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1979) 364.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 410.

as fresh and fissionable as “We Know That Christ is Raised.” Moreover, older hymns seem to be recast with baptism in mind. The third stanza of “Out of the Depths,” for example, takes a refreshingly baptismal turn when we acknowledge that God’s “promise keeps us strong and sure;/We trust the holy signature/Inscribed upon our temples.” That baptismal reference is so subtle that we can easily miss it. Yet there it is. In the midst of a hymn, often sung at funerals, during Lent, and on other occasions when we wish to ponder such matters as justification, we are reminded of God’s gracious act on our behalf in baptism. Baptism is now seen as a central act in Lutheran theology and hymnody.

The vitality of this recurrent baptismal interest is evident not only in LBW; it is manifest in hymnals as diverse as *The Hymnal 1982*, *The United Methodist Hymnal* (1989), and *Gather* (1988). Clearly baptism, sometimes called “Christian Initiation,” has assumed a renewed significance in the theology, liturgy, and hymnody of worshiping communities.

### III. THE CHANGED ROLE OF THE CLERGY

There are at least three areas of pastoral ministry where the new focus on baptism could be expected to have some impact. These areas are discipleship, ministry of word and sacrament, and pastoral preparation for baptism.

*1. The Life of Discipleship.* One of the consequences of the recent emphasis on baptism is an increased interest in the life of discipleship and spirituality. The number of publications in this area has exploded. Many leaders in ministry have pointed to a great spiritual thirst in recent

times. For some that thirst is slaked by a return to the font. Susanne Johnson recognizes that the sacraments are “radical-countercultural ways of living, drawing us more fully into God’s redemptive work.”<sup>5</sup> She suggests that baptism is one of the chief means by which this new life is begun and nurtured. Baptism, she claims, is our ordination into the ministry of God’s realm in the world.

With this ordination in baptism we should expect to see an increased sense of the life of discipleship because discipleship is connected to baptism and to God’s action of calling and sending us. How we live our lives as people first called and gathered by the Spirit and then by the church should be shaped by the baptismal vows. In our daily dying and renewal we continue to renounce the devil, to affirm the triune God, and to serve, having been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever. Ideally, leaders in the church are not primarily administrators, teachers, counselors, or even presiders at the altar. They are baptized children of God living out their ministry of God’s realm in the world.

2. *The Ministry of Word and Sacrament.* The renewed emphasis on baptism has also provided a significant opportunity for leaders in the church to address catechetical issues and nurture the people through them. The entire life cycle of the

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<sup>5</sup>Susanne Johnson, *Christian Spiritual Formation in the Church and Classroom* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989) 53.

Christian can be shaped by a recognition of the importance of baptism: celebrating the sacrament of holy baptism in the liturgy; reflecting on the place of baptism in the confession rites of the church; preaching about baptism at intervals throughout the church year; recognizing the renewed interest in the Easter Vigil; utilizing the liturgy of Affirmation of Baptism, especially as it relates to renewal and reception of members and confirmation; lifting up the value of the ministry of healing; and rethinking our approach to the Order for Burial of the Dead. And in all these liturgical actions, baptism may be seen as providing opportunities to tell and reinforce the story and to pass on the tradition of a called people.

3. *Pastoral Preparation for Baptism.* In a ministry that has stretched across thirty years, I have seen a shift with regard to baptism. Before the late 1970s baptismal minimalism prevailed. What preparation there was with the family tended to focus on whether the baby would “get done” on Saturday morning or after church on Sunday. There were strong parental feelings that the baby’s “christening” should be done as soon as possible because there was fear of certain ultimate consequences (what if, God forbid, something should happen) and the pressure of other more immediate realities (the grandparents would be in town). Fear or social pressure, rather than sacramental theology, often became the motivation. It must be admitted that not infrequently baptism is still driven by these motivations today.

But in the past two decades the practice of baptism has changed visibly. We have described some of these changes in our third scene. There are others as well. For one thing, more water is used. Because the liturgy includes the lengthy Flood Prayer, there is somewhat less tendency for the sacrament to be sentimentalized as it often was when the primary text was Jesus urging the little children to come unto him. And, because the congregation is invited to affirm the

creed with the baptismal party and welcome the newly baptized into the Lord's family, there is a pronounced emphasis on baptism as initiation into the community of faith.

Certainly, opportunities are present for instruction in these matters, because baptism pertains not only to the liturgy in the church, but also to a life-long commitment in the world. Of course, we have not so much discovered this point in recent years as sharpened it. In a day when evangelical Christians like to point to the fact that they have been "born again," Lutheran teaching has come to acknowledge that fact too—with its own peculiar spin. Informed by the words of the baptismal address, we can affirm daily that our gracious heavenly Father liberates us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ and that in the waters of baptism we are reborn children of God, made members of the church, and become inheritors of eternal life.

Pastoral preparation for baptism—indeed, Christian education in general—can and should remind parents, children, sponsors, and the members of our congregations that we are first and foremost a baptized people. It is always appropriate to remind troubled believers of Luther's affirmation every time he suffered from personal anxieties, theological doubts, a troubled conscience, or fears of

failure: "I have been baptized."<sup>6</sup> The daily implications of the baptized life can open many possibilities not only for instruction prior to the sacrament, but also for preaching, confirmation, adult education, and the life of prayer and discipleship.

#### IV. IS THERE ANY DIFFERENCE?

Every generation likes to think it has discovered the truth anew and that its view of things is earth-changing. Many who have come to see baptism afresh in the past two decades feel that their views are crucial to the revitalization of the church. While this view must be taken seriously, on some levels it is just not so. The new emphasis on baptism comes at a time of declining baptized membership and an increasingly troubled church. Matters of liturgy are as complex and confusing as ever, with some people seeking to implement the insights of the liturgical renewal movement, others pressing for much more relaxed and informal practice, and still others willing to leave structured liturgy behind altogether. Sometimes a baptismal practice like immersing the paschal candle in the font or lifting a newly baptized infant in procession throughout the congregation can be just as off-putting as the older practices of meeting in an empty church on Saturday morning or adding a bit of splash to the rite by importing water from the River Jordan. According to some observers, the renewed emphasis on baptism may really be only a side stream in the life of the church.

On the other hand, things are different in the church today at least in part because of our rethinking this sacrament and the effect of such rethinking on liturgy and life. For one thing, our consciousness has been raised because the range of baptismal themes has been broadened. James F. White<sup>7</sup> has shown that there are a number of ways to regard baptism biblically. It is not, as sometimes popularly regarded, fear or social pressures that should inform us.

We knew that all along, of course. But increasingly we are more confident in teaching that baptism is union to Jesus Christ and his work; it is incorporation into Christ's body on earth—the church; it is the gift of the Holy Spirit; it is forgiveness of sins; it is new life. These

themes open the possibility of a much wider and more compelling conversation among the people of God. Baptism as a many-splendored thing can engage and encourage people of all ages in patterns of prayer, education, vocation, liturgy, and hymnody. In the process of pursuing this conversation pastoral life and practice have been greatly enriched. In short, the focus on baptism has helped sharpen the focus of ministry.

But there are abiding tensions. We do not quite know how to make all the connections implied by the emerging conversation. People still come to “get the kid done before something bad happens.” The sacrament is frequently forgotten after the family has left the font. And congregations, instead of being renewed with new life, are dismayed and troubled by signs of loss and decay in church and

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<sup>6</sup>William Lazareth and Raymond Tiemeyer, *In, Not of: Living Our Baptism in the World* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Church Press, 1964) 8.

<sup>7</sup>James F. White, *Sacraments as God's Self-Giving* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983) 34-42.

society. In the midst of all the possibilities of baptismal promise there are abiding puzzlements as well.

#### V. A POSTSCRIPT ON LIVING WATER

At the seminary where I serve there is a huge baptismal font. It holds about fifty-five gallons of water that is continually and audibly recycled. The font is a most imposing object and no one who enters the chapel can ignore it. Yet, there are rarely baptisms at that font, for the seminary does not see itself as a baptizing body. Every now and again the big tub leaks, causing bother and inconvenience to many. Similarly, while imposing and full of promise, the running waters of baptism can be marginal to life or a bother to put up with.

Still, there are times when the seminary community reaches a moment of silence in the midst of its ebullient worship. In those moments there can be heard the unmistakable trickling of water, subtly reminding the members of the diverse community that each has been baptized and is a part of a body of believers that is one in Christ. The living waters flow in the midst of the community's life, a sign to one and all of the Spirit's presence. When people enter to worship or go out to serve, they are free to dip into the water and make the sign of the cross as a reminder of their baptism. Baptism—the holy signature inscribed upon our temples—is a constant reminder of God's promise for us and for the church. The promise is both comforting and challenging.

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