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Understanding Baptism. In this issue authors help us better understand the meaning of the sacrament of baptism and how that doctrine shapes our view of the world and informs our decisions about moral issues like abortion. Articles also counter the misconception that once people are baptized, they no longer sin and are automatically fit for leadership.

The Threefold Significance of Baptism

by Randall Otto

Reformed theology has historically emphasized the continuity of the Old and New Testaments, the New Testament being the fulfillment and completion of that which was anticipated and inchoate in the Old Testament. This foundational idea thus serves as the basis for the Reformed doctrine that salvation has always been by God's grace through faith in God's promised Redeemer, that God has always had a people of his own, known as Israel in the Old Testament and the church, or the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) in the New, so that, "if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Gal. 3:29). The church has existed from the dawn of the covenant of grace (Scots Conf. ch. 16; Second Helvetic Conf. ch. 17), when God promised upon the fall of Adam that he would deliver his elect out of their state of sin and misery and bring them to salvation through a Redeemer (Shorter Cat., Q. 20). This covenant of grace thus spans Old and New Testaments, so that, while that covenant is "differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel" (Westminster Conf. ch. 7), "there was and is one fellowship, one salvation in the one Messiah; in whom, as members of one body under one Head, all united together in the same faith" despite the "diversity of times, and a diversity in the signs of the promised and delivered Christ" (Second Helvetic Conf. ch. 17).

Entry into the fellowship of God's people in the period of the Old Testament was through circumcision. Entry into the fellowship of God's people in the New Testament is through baptism. Baptism thus serves as the New Testament counterpart to circumcision, just as the Lord's Supper serves as the New Testament counterpart to the Old Testament Passover. In each testament, these sacraments serve as signs, symbols, and seals instituted by God through which his covenant grace is mediated by the Word and Holy Spirit unto the salvation, sanctification, and service of his elect.

The Reformed emphasis in the sacraments is on what God does, not what the recipient does. The sacraments are thus means of grace, not testimonies of personal faith as is the case in Baptist theology. The sacraments

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do not, however, operate apart from faith, as Roman Catholic theology has historically maintained. Rather, in Reformed theology it is the Holy Spirit who creates faith through the Word, which faith is then strengthened and confirmed by the sacraments. Hence, while both the Word and sacraments are instituted by God as the means of grace pointing to and confirming the salvation found in Christ alone which is received by faith alone, the Word is foundational. There is no sacrament apart from the Word and Spirit. Baptism in the Reformed tradition may be said to have a threefold significance as a sign, symbol, and seal of salvation, sanctification, and service for the people of God.

Baptism as a Sacrament of Salvation

As noted above, the sacraments are signs, pointing to the work of God's promised Redeemer. They are not merely signs, however, but are means of grace by which the work of the Holy Spirit in and through the Word is signified and sealed.

Baptism is a sign and seal of salvation, pointing to and serving as a means by which the Holy Spirit applies the redemption purchased by Christ. The Westminster Confession speaks of baptism as a sacrament for "the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church, but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in newness of life" (ch. 28).

Just as circumcision was the basis by which one (whether born of Abraham or a foreigner) became a part of Abraham's people according to the covenant made by God in Gen. 17, with any not being circumcised considered as "cut off from his people" for having broken God's covenant, so baptism in the New Testament serves as the basis of initiation into the people of God, the church. It is to be noted that this covenant was made with Abraham *after* he believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6), after he was justified by faith in God's promise of a son (ultimately realized in Christ, Gal. 3:16) and the universal blessing to come through him. Thus, the covenant made in Gen. 17 was made with Abraham, a believer, and with his children, the males to be circumcised at eight days for inclusion in the covenant. This serves as the basis for Peter's proclamation at Pentecost to Jews gathered from all over the empire that "the promise is for you and your children," as well as to Gentiles as those "who are far off," for the promise is "for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). If the New Testament church is understood as the realization of and fulfillment of the promises made to Israel, embracing the faith of father Abraham, it should be expected that the promise of salvation as signified in baptism would be for believers and their children (see Marcel, 1953). It is within the covenant people, "the visible Church," "the Kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ; the house and family of God, through which men are ordinarily saved and union with which is essential to their best growth and service" (Westminster Conf., ch. 27). Hence, John Calvin urged that those for whom God "is Father the church may also be Mother" (Inst., IV, i, 1), since "there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us in her care and guidance"; in short, "away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation" (Inst., IV, i, 4).

Thus, entry into the church is crucial for salvation. "All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ" (Gal. 3:27). Here we encounter wording, found elsewhere in Paul (e.g., "washing with water through the word" [Eph. 5:26]; "washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit" [Tit. 3:5]) and Peter ("baptism that now saves you" [1 Pet. 3:21]) that might seem to suggest that the water itself regenerates the individual, i.e., that he is saved by baptism. While there were some in the early centuries of the church who did maintain this position, the Presbyterian Church has never held to baptismal regeneration. The Westminster Confession speaks of baptism as "a sign and seal" of "ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins." Those in the blogosphere who maintain that the Presbyterian Church teaches baptismal regeneration completely miss the phrasing, "sign and seal." There is a difference between the sign and the thing signified, though "there is in every sacrament a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified; whence it comes to pass that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other" (Westminster Conf., ch. 29). The water of baptism is an outward sign of an inward grace, wrought by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God.

> Paul did not mean to signify that our cleansing and salvation are accomplished by water, or that water contains in itself the power to cleanse, regenerate, and renew; nor that here is the cause of salvation, but only that in this sacrament are received the knowledge and certainty of such gifts…. Indeed, baptism promises us no other purification than through the sprinkling of Christ's blood, which is represented by means of water from the resemblance to cleansing and washing (Calvin, Inst., IV, xv, 2).

The Heidelberg Catechism answers the question (Q. 72), "Does merely the outward washing with water itself wash away sins?," "No; for only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all

sins." It is of the utmost importance pastorally to emphasize that salvation is by God's grace through faith in Christ's shed blood on the cross, particularly in light of wording in the baptismal liturgy that could easily be misconstrued to teach baptismal regeneration:

> We thank you, O God, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. From it we are raised to share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit. Send your Spirit to move over this water that it may be a fountain of deliverance and rebirth. Wash away the sin of all who are cleansed by it. Raise them to new life, and graft them to the body of Christ. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon them, that they may have the power to do your will, and continue forever in the risen life of Christ (*Book of Common Worship*, Pastoral Ed., 1993, pp. 17 and 49).

Wording to be considered for alternative use could be the following:

> We thank you, O God, for the water of baptism, which pictures that we are buried with Christ in his death, raised to share in his resurrection, and reborn by the power of the Holy Spirit. Send your Spirit to move over this water that it may be a sign and seal of deliverance and rebirth, of washing away of sin, raising to new life, and engrafting into the body of Christ. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon these here gathered that they may have the power to do your will and continue forever in the risen life of Christ.

In the Old Testament, circumcision was an outward sign, symbol and seal of the inward grace wrought in the hearts of those who were regenerated by God's Word and Spirit to a genuine saving faith ("The Lord your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live" [Deut. 30:6]). It was certainly possible, however, that those who were circumcised outwardly and were outward members of the people of God could have "uncircumcised hearts and ears" (Acts 7:51). Circumcision in the Old Testament was a means of grace to be realized in a changed heart, in repentance from sin and faith, love and obedience toward God through the salvation promised in the Passover Lamb. "A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit" (Rom. 2:28-29). Indeed, Paul will turn the tables on those Jews who depend on circumcision but not on Christ, calling them what the Jews called Gentiles, "dogs." "For it is we who are the circumcision, we who worship by the Spirit of God, who glory in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:2-3).

The same is true of those who are baptized. Baptism is a means of grace which portrays and seals to believers the promises of God in Christ, but it must be met with faith wrought by the Spirit through the Word of Christ. When and how that faith arises is as mysterious as the way the wind blows, as Jesus told Nicodemus. The wind, of course, represents the working of the Spirit. However, the reality is, "no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5). To be in the covenant community and under the regular proclamation of the Word and working of the Spirit is the most likely way for saving faith to arise. Hence, baptism can be said to be central (but not requisite) to salvation. "The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in his appointed time" (Westminster Conf., ch. 30).

Baptism as a Sacrament of Sanctification

Contrary to the Lord's Supper and its Old Testament counterpart Passover, both of which are or were regularly administered, baptism, as was true of its Old Testament counterpart circumcision, is only to be administered once. Notwithstanding, just as baptism portrays for us cleansing from sin and seals unto us the grace conferred unto salvation, so it also calls us to remember the persistent need of the believer to be cleansed from residual sin. Calvin observes, "Paul joins together the Word of life and the baptism of water, as if he had said: 'Through the gospel a message of our cleansing and sanctification is brought to us; through such baptism the message is sealed'" (Inst., IV, xv, 2).

> We must realize that at whatever time we are baptized, we are once for all washed and purged for our whole life. Therefore, as often as we fall away, we ought to recall the memory of our baptism and fortify our mind with it, that we may always be sure and confident of the forgiveness of sins (Inst., IV, xv, 3).

Calvin goes on to insist that the Christian not thus "take leave to sin in the future, as this has certainly not taught us to be so bold."

This is precisely in accord with the apostle Paul's injunction in Rom. 6 against persistence in sinning. The reason the Christian cannot continue in sin is because "we died to sin," an idea he draws out in the association of baptism with Christ's death and burial: "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried

with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Rom. 6:3-4). Union with Christ in baptism is to elicit a changed life wherein the Christian reckons himself dead to sin and a slave to righteousness. The Christian no longer belongs to himself, but to the one with whom he has been united in death and resurrection, Jesus Christ (cf. Gal. 2:20).

> God also separates us from all strange religions and peoples by the symbol of baptism, and consecrates us to himself as his property. We, therefore, confess our faith when we are baptized, and obligate ourselves to God for obedience, mortification of the flesh, and newness of life. Hence, we are enlisted in the holy military service of Christ that all our life long we should fight against the world, Satan, and our own flesh (Second Helvetic Conf., ch. 20).

To be washed with the blood and Spirit of Christ, says the Heidelberg Catechism (Q. 70), entails being "renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified as members of Christ, so that we may more and more die unto sin and live in a consecrated and blameless way." It is surely with such ideas in mind that Paul says Christ "loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:25-27). There is clearly an eschatological focus in this passage that intimates an ongoing cleansing from sin "by the washing with water through the word." "If Christ's death is the point in history at which his love was demonstrated, baptism is the point at which the Church experiences Christ's continuing purifying love for her as his bride" (Lincoln, 1998).

Washing, then, in Christ entails sanctification for a new life, a life lived as one dead to sin and alive to righteousness, "so that we may more and more die unto sin and live in a consecrated and blameless way" (Heidelberg Cat., Q. 70). Baptism involves setting one apart for a holy life and the freedom of living in the Spirit in obedience to the commands of God (Col. 2:11ff.) as one who has set his mind on things above (Col. 3:2), where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.

Baptism as a Sacrament of Service

Salvation and sanctification are not ends in themselves, but the means by which those who have been born of God and empowered by his Spirit live in the worship and service of the Lord. Baptism thus serves finally as a sacrament of service. If salvation by grace through faith in Christ is for the purpose of the praise and service of God, if we are "created in Christ Jesus to do good works" (Eph. 2:10), then it should be expected that baptism be viewed as a sacrament of service. "Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world" (PCUSA *Directory for Worship*, W-2.3006).

As the sign and seal of incorporation into Christ, baptism is a sacrament calling upon those to whom it is administered to respond in faithful obedience and service to the triune God. Baptism entails vows taken either by the adult baptized or by the parent on behalf of the child who is baptized, which are then to be ratified or confirmed at the age of adulthood. In the words of the baptismal liturgy found in the *Book of Common Worship*, they "promise to live the Christian faith, and to teach that faith" to their children (p. 43). They vow to "turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world" (p. 45), to "turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as [their] Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love" (p. 45), and "be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love" (p. 45). They promise to "be a faithful member" of the congregation into which they are baptized, to "share in its worship and ministry" through their prayers and gifts, study and service, thus fulfilling their call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ (p. 48). Failure to uphold these vows would seem to be nothing less than a violation of the third commandment, a misusing of God's name, the triune name with which the baptized has been identified. Surely this is why the Larger Catechism can include such things among the "sins forbidden in the Third Commandment" as "violating our oaths and vows, if lawful," "perverting the Word," "the maintaining of false doctrines," "the maligning, scorning, reviling, or any way opposing of God's truth, grace, and ways; making profession of religion in hypocrisy, or for sinister ends; being ashamed of it, or a shame to it, by uncomfortable, unwise, unfruitful, and offensive walking or backsliding from it" (Q. 113). Those who receive the sacrament of baptism should be careful that God's grace therein is not in them "without effect" (1 Cor. 15:10), "for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name" (Ex. 20:7).

Baptism in the name of the triune God is a call to follow and represent God in Christ by the Spirit faithfully within the world. "In our baptism each of us is called to the one ministry of Jesus Christ" (Discerning, p. 5). We are "joined to Christ's ministry of love, peace, and justice," as the baptismal liturgy states. Some years ago in an article entitled "Baptism and the *Munus Triplex*," the author sought to develop what is involved in baptism by drawing on the significance of Christ's baptism and the *munus triplex*, or threefold office of prophet, priest and king, for all those baptized into

Christ (Otto, 2007). Hence, baptism signified for Jesus, and thus for those incorporated into him in baptism, an identification with and submission to God's Word associated with the prophetic office.

> Those who are Christians merely in appearance are those who have been baptized, and who are in the company of those who are called, and profess the Christian faith; but are without conversion…. Those are true christians [sic] who are not only baptized and profess the doctrine of Christ, but who are also possessed of a true faith, and declare this by the fruits of repentance; or, they are those who are members of Christ by a true faith, and are made partakers of his anointing (Ursinus, n.d., p. 176).

That Jesus received at baptism a vision of heaven being opened is in keeping with the prophetic call (Matt 3:16; cf. Ezek 1:1; Acts 10:11), as is his endowment with the Spirit. This anointing which Jesus received when the heavens opened and the Spirit descended upon him is the same anointing that all who are baptized in his name receive, to call for repentance from sin and to proclaim the kingdom and righteous will of God.

Baptism also signifies anointing with God's Spirit, as was found in the calling of a priest. Luke's observation that Jesus was "about thirty years old when he began his ministry" (Luke 3:23), occurring as it does right after his baptism, may suggest his anointing at baptism was a call to priestly ministry, since that is the age at which Levitical priests began their ministries (Num 4:3, 23, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47). It signified the promise and bestowment of the gifts necessary for their calling. In his baptism, Peter says, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power" (Acts 10:37-38). That power was then demonstrated in Jesus' overcoming the devil in the wilderness and ultimately in his triumph on the cross over the principalities and powers of this world when he offered up himself as high priest the sacrifice of himself as the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. As disciples of the Christ, Christians share in Jesus' anointing. Just as Jesus in his baptism was "anointed with the Holy Spirit to undertake the way of the servant manifested in his sufferings, death, and resurrection" (W-2.300), so Christians are in their baptism anointed with the Holy Spirit to take up their cross and follow Jesus as God's servants.

Finally, baptism signifies confirmation as God's son and the calling to rule on his behalf as a king. At his baptism, Jesus hears a voice from heaven confirming him as God's Son, in whom God is well pleased (Matt 3:17; Mark 1:11; Luke 3:22). This confirmation is a quote from Ps 2:7, a royal psalm used in the coronation of Davidic kings, confirming their place as the Lord's "Anointed One" (Ps 2:2), his "King installed on Zion" (Ps 2:6), God's "Son" (Ps 2:7). As God's representative and vicegerent, the Davidic king was spoken of as God's son (cf. 2 Sam 7:14). Those who follow Jesus in baptism and share "in his anointing" are responsible to "fight against sin and the devil with a free and good conscience throughout this life and hereafter rule with him in eternity over all creatures." As heirs together with him, it is the Christian's duty to rule over all things, not just "hereafter" "in eternity," but here and now, according to the stewardship given humanity in creation to rule over all things as God's representatives. Traditionally known as "the cultural mandate" (Gen 1:26; Ps 8:4-8), Christians have, by virtue of their baptism, a calling and a responsibility to bring all things under the Lordship and dominion of Jesus Christ.

The call to be a Christian is "the universal calling in our baptism to follow and serve Jesus Christ. Each Christian is called to determine his or her particular ministry and to live out that ministry" (Discerning, n.d., p. 7). Hence, while all are in baptism called to serve Jesus Christ in faithful obedience to his Word in the power of the Holy Spirit, it must not be assumed that all who are baptized are empowered by the Spirit to serve in all facets of the church's life. "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord" (1 Cor. 12:4). While it is true that, "in Christ, by the power of the Spirit, God unites persons through baptism regardless of race, ethnicity, age, sex, disability, geography, or theological conviction" so that "there is therefore no place in the life of the Church for discrimination against any person" (F-1.0403), it does not by any means follow that baptism in and of itself is sufficient for one to be ordained or to exercise leadership in the Church. Baptism is thus requisite for anyone who would serve as an elder or deacon, for instance, but greater understanding of the Word and maturity in the faith, together with conformity to the other characteristics found in 1 Tim. 3, e.g., should be expected of those who would lead the church. One seeking a call to the ordained ministry should thus have received the "secret call," the inner leading of the Spirit to pursue specialized ministry, as well as the "providential call," the practical demonstration of that giftedness, which is then confirmed by the "ecclesiastical call" in which ecclesiastical councils examine and ratify the validity of that call (so Discerning, n.d.). No one should be approved as thus "called" who lives in defiance of the clear teachings of God's Word and the call of baptism to salvation and sanctification as previously described. God's judgment upon the priest Eli's sons Hophni and Phinehas in 1 Samuel 2 for their immorality and failure to honor God's requirements in the sacrifices they offered was a sign not only to Eli, but to all of God's people. The call to ordained ministry entails the requirement to "keep as the pattern of sound teaching, with faith and love in Christ Jesus" as found in the

apostolic witness and to "guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you" with the help of the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 1:13-14). Those who are ordained are to "set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12) and thus to watch their lives and doctrine closely (1 Tim. 4:16).

Conclusion

Baptism in the Reformed tradition is the sign, symbol, and seal by which one is incorporated into the body of Christ. It is an outward sign of an inward grace, through the working of the Holy Spirit by the Word. Incorporation into Christ is for the purpose of salvation, sanctification, and service. Baptism does not of itself accomplish any of this, yet as a means of grace is central to all of it. It is a central means by which the Spirit works through the Word in the hearts and lives of those who receive the sacrament to bring about new birth, holiness and righteousness, and a life lived in sacrificial love for the glory of God in Christ. As such, baptism is a sacrament of salvation, sanctification, and service.

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What, Who, Where, How: Reformed Perspectives on Baptism

By Robert P. Mills

Introduction

Between and even within today's congregations and denominations, almost every aspect of baptism seems to be a topic of debate. Should we baptize babies as well as adults? Should we immerse or merely sprinkle? Indeed, why do we baptize at all? While these and other questions are widely debated, such debates often generate more heat than light.

The passion surrounding discussions of baptism shows that concerns about who gets baptized when, where, and how are not abstract, academic ruminations of interest only to professional theologians. Rather, they are intensely practical and personal concerns that arise in the daily faith and life of the people of God. Whether we realize it or not, our answers to these questions will shape both the way we live together in the Church and the ways in which the Church reaches out to an increasingly post-Christian culture.

In addressing this potentially divisive topic, James Torrance observes, "In any discussion of baptism, the first question to be asked is not who should be baptized—infants or adults or both—nor how it should be administered—by sprinkling, pouring, or immersion—nor whether it may be repeated. These are important questions, but they can only be answered when we have first asked what the meaning of baptism is. What does it signify? The important thing is not the sign but the *reality signified*."[1]

Following Torrance's lead, and consisting mainly of citations of theologians from the Reformation through today, this article will offer Reformed perspectives on four key questions in current debates about baptism: What is the significance of baptism? Who should we baptize? How should we baptize? and, Where should we baptize?

What is the significance of baptism?

When John Calvin described baptism as "a *sign* of the initiation by which we are received into the society of the church, in order that, engrafted in Christ, we may be reckoned among God's children"[2] (emphasis added), he was far from the first theologian to see the sacrament of baptism as a sign.

Baptism as Sacrament and Sign

As Donald Bloesch observes "It was Augustine who defined a sacrament as 'a visible sign of an invisible grace.' A sacrament has two sides—the inner reality and the outward sign; these two come together through the power of the Holy Spirit.… Augustine's emphasis was not on the sacrament as a magical cure-all but on 'the inner acceptance of the grace offered in the sacrament.'"[3]

He continues, "For Calvin, who is here very close to Augustine, the sign becomes an instrument or means of grace when united with the preaching of the Word.… Ulrich Zwingli, on the other hand, thought within the framework of a radical dualism that separated the spiritual and the material so that the only efficacious baptism is the baptism of the Spirit. The outward sign becomes not a means of grace but a testimony to grace. In the radical Zwinglian view, the sacraments become signs of faith and commitment."[4]

The Westminster Confession of Faith declares "There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other" (27.2).

Elaborating on this distinction, Daniel Migliore insists, "The sign and the reality signified must neither be identified (as Barth thinks the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptism tends to do), nor must the sign be reduced to an empty cipher or mere illustration (as happens in Zwinglian teaching). While taking creaturely form, the grace of God always remains free and beyond our control."[5]

The Reality Baptism Signifies

In discussing the Reformed understanding of the significance of baptism, Hugh Thompson Kerr draws on John Knox's *Book of Common Order* and the Westminster Confession of Faith:

> John Knox's *Book of Common Order*, in use in Scotland from 1564-1645, says "Baptism was ordained to be ministered in the element of water, to teach us that like as water outwardly doth wash away the filth of the body, so inwardly doth the virtue of Christ's blood purge our souls from that corruption and deadly poison, wherewith by nature we were infected, whose venomous dregs, although they continue in this our flesh, yet by the merits of his death are not imputed unto us, because the justice of Jesus Christ is made ours by Baptism, not that we think any such virtue or power to be included in the visible water, or outward action, for many have been baptised, and yet never inwardly purged; but that our Saviour Christ, who commanded Baptism to be ministered, will, by the power of His Holy Spirit, effectually work in the hearts of His Elect, in time convenient, all that is meant and signified by the same."
>
> The Westminster Confession of Faith, seeking to make clear the same Calvinistic position, says, "The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost" (28.6).[6]

Answering his own question about the reality that baptism signifies, James Torrance describes three ways in which baptism serves as a sign.

First, he says, baptism is a sign of the one work of the one God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—in the fulfillment of his purpose "to bring many sons to glory." He quotes from the French Reformed baptismal liturgy:

> Little child, for you Jesus Christ has come, he has fought, he has suffered. For you he entered the shadow of Gethsemane and the horror of Calvary. For you he uttered the cry "It is finished!" For you he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and there he intercedes—for you little child even though you do not know it. But in this way the word of the Gospel becomes true. We love him because he first loved us.

Baptism is thus the sign of what the triune God does: God forgives, God cleanses, God regenerates, God adopts, God sends the Spirit of his Son into our hearts whereby in response we cry: "Abba, Father."

Second, Torrance writes, baptism is a sign of the covenant of grace.

> The covenant of grace is not a bilateral covenant which we make with God at this moment of time as though God's grace is contingent on our faith and decision! Baptism then would be a seal of my faith and my decision, a badge of my conversion! The good news is that God has made a covenant for us in Christ, and sealed it with his blood nineteen hundred years ago.… Baptism is an act of faith which sets

forth that covenant made for us and our children in Christ so long ago.

Third, says Torrance, Jesus spoke of his death on the cross as his baptism (Luke 12:25; Mark 10:38). This is not just a metaphor for suffering. It is by his baptism for us—his cross, his atoning death and his resurrection—that he forgives and sanctifies and secures our sonship.

"Baptism is the sacrament of cleansing and forgiveness. But it is not the water, not the church, not the minister, not my faith, not my dying and rising, which forgives and heals. It is Christ who has done this for us and in us by his Spirit. So we are baptized 'in the name of Christ' —not our own name—and we are baptized into a life of union with Christ, of dying and rising with Christ, into a life of communion."[7]

While the foregoing is certainly a very brief survey of the significance of baptism, it does lay the foundation for considering the next three questions.

Who should be baptized?

While questions about where and how we baptize are challenging and important, perhaps the most divisive question about baptism in the Church today concerns who the Church rightly ought to baptize.

The Roman Catholic theologian Joseph Martos has aptly observed, "As the practice of baptism has varied, Christians' understanding of baptism has varied, and yet through it all there is a continuity which is greater than the differences. For *the theology of baptism is always a variation on the theme of salvation* played in different modes and different keys in different ages."[8] [emphasis added]

The importance of Martos' observation cannot be overemphasized. The Reformed tradition, which, as indicated above, understands salvation to be God's work alone, recognizes the validity of infant baptism. In contrast, the Anabaptist tradition rejects the notion of infant baptism on the grounds that salvation requires some conscious action by an individual before he or she can be saved. Ultimately, it is this foundational difference in how we are saved that leads to different understandings of who should be baptized.

The Practice of Infant Baptism

While the Church throughout its history has numbered among its members those who supported and those who opposed infant baptism, there is significant historical evidence that infant baptism was practiced from the Church's earliest days.

Alister McGrath shows that the practice of infant baptism "had become normal, if not universal, by the second or third century…. In the third century, Origen treated infant baptism as a universal practice.… Opposition to the practice can be seen in the writings of Tertullian, who argued that the baptism of children should be deferred until such time as they 'know Christ.'"[9]

Expanding on these observations Hugh Thompson Kerr notes that "Tertullian argued against baptism not only of infants but of children, which is evidence that such baptism was the accepted practice of his day. It was certainly not an innovation. Origen states that the custom had come down from apostolic times.

> If there were in the New Testament any definite statement to the effect that baptism should not be administered to little children, then we should be constrained to follow New Testament guidance. There is, however, no such prohibition and there is at the same time presumptive evidence that children were included in the covenant of grace and in the fellowship of the Christian Church.… There are repeated references in the New Testament to the baptism of whole families and households, and it is inconceivable that there were no little children in these homes. The family then, as now, was an organic unity and as a unit was received into community life.

Kerr concludes, "These references, of course, give no positive assurance that in the New Testament Church the baptism of infants was observed, but it is pertinent to recognize the fact that the baptism of families and households is presumptive evidence that children were included."[10]

Turning from the history to the theology of infant baptism, Daniel Migliore agrees with Martos' observation when he writes: "A doctrine of baptism cannot be isolated from its larger theological context. Luther's interpretation of baptism is inseparably connected with his doctrine of justification by grace through faith, and Calvin's teaching is closely related to his doctrine of the covenant. Similarly, Barth's doctrine of baptism is embedded in his entire theology and lights up its central themes."[11]

Again quoting Kerr, "Augustine, toward the end of the fourth century wrote, 'Therefore an infant, although he is not yet a believer in the sense of having that faith which includes the consenting will of those who exercise it, nevertheless becomes a believer through the sacrament of that faith.… The infant, though not yet possessing a faith helped by the understanding, is not obstructing faith by an antagonism of the understanding,

and therefore receives with profit the sacrament of faith.'"[12]

The Reformation-era Heidelberg Catechism affirms the validity of infant baptism, answering question 74, "Should infants, too, be baptized?" by saying:

> A. Yes. Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation. Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults. Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers. This was done in the old covenant by circumcision, in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.

Moving into the 20th century, Migliore writes, "In his early period of his development, Barth staunchly supports infant baptism.… he asks 'Does it make any sense to be ashamed of infant baptism on the grounds that human reason and experience are absent in this act? As if they are not *always* lacking with respect to what this act means. As if even the baptism of the most mature, most pious, and most rational adult could be in principle anything other than 'infant' baptism.'"[13]

Another line of theological support for infant baptism is to see it in continuity with, and as a replacement for, the Jewish rite of circumcision.

> The origins of this approach are to be found with Zwingli.… Zwingli found his answer in the Old Testament, which stipulated that male infants born within the bounds of Israel should have an outward sign of their membership of the people of God. The outward sign in question was circumcision—that is, the removal of the foreskin. Infant baptism was thus to be seen as analogous to circumcision—a sign of belonging to a covenant community.[14]

The Anabaptists and Believer's Baptism

The Anabaptist wing of the Protestant Reformation was marked by the belief that the only people who should be baptized were those who had made a personal, public confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. "Anabaptist" (the prefix *ana* is Latin meaning "again") literally means "rebaptizer."

Historically, Anabaptists stressed that only believers are to be baptized; as a result they rejected infant baptism as invalid, necessitating the rebaptism of those who had become believers but who had received only infant baptism. Baptism is to be administered only to those who consciously exhibit faith in Christ. Today this belief is found in most Baptist churches as well as in churches that view themselves as direct descendants of the Reformation-era Anabaptists.

For example, the U.S. Mennonite Brethren website lists as one of the 12 Principles of Anabaptism:

> *The necessity of a believers church.* Anabaptists believe that Christian conversion, while not necessarily sudden and traumatic, always involves a conscious decision. "Unless a person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." Believing that an infant can have no conscious, intelligent faith in Christ, Anabaptists baptize only those who have come to a personal, living faith. Voluntary baptism, together with a commitment to walk in the full newness of life and to strive for purity in the church, constitutes the basis of church membership.[15]

A both/and approach

According to McGrath, "The essential difference between Zwingli's view and [the Anabaptist] position is that the event which baptism publicly declares is interpreted differently. Zwingli understands the event in question to be *birth into a believing community;* Baptist writers generally understand it to be *the dawn of a personal faith in the life of an individual*."[16]

Taking an irenic approach in support of the Reformed position, Bloesch believes that "Pedobaptism is a more credible symbolism for the mystery that God's election is prior to human decision. Believer's baptism calls our attention to the biblical truth that God's election is realized through human decision. My recommendation is that both sides in this dispute respect the integrity of the other side and also accept the baptism of the other side, so long as it is performed in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and in the context of the community of faith."[17]

In a similar vein, Donald Wilson Stake observes,

> Many Protestants baptize adults who have not been previously baptized but stress the baptism of infants. There is a realization that baptism is the beginning of one's life in Christ and will issue in personal commitment, witness, and service. For the infant, this means a commitment on the part of the church to nurture the child in faith toward personal confession of faith and a life of discipleship. For the adult, this means a similar commitment on the church's part to help the disciple grow in faith and in service. Baptism in either case is prophetic of the Christian life, the beginning of a long process to be developed through one's life by the church.[18]

And David F. Wright insists,

> It is surely a critical test of a satisfactory baptismal theology that it can encompass both infant and

believers' baptism within a single understanding. As I see it, baptism as the sign of the covenant is appropriately given by Christ's ministers whenever there are grounds for believing that God is calling persons into his covenant people which is the body of Christ. These grounds are of two kinds: for those able to speak for themselves, it is their faith, professed (Acts 8:12, 37-38; 11:16-17; 16:31-33, etc.); for those not so able, it is their birth to parents whose faith enables them to speak on their children's behalf.[19]

How should we baptize?

"There are, generally speaking, two opinions regarding the proper manner of administering baptism: that only immersion is lawful, and that the mode of baptism is a matter of indifference."[20]

Hughes Oliphant Olds writes, "Whether baptism should be administered by immersion or sprinkling has aggravated American Protestantism unduly. If it is true that in classical Greek the word for baptism means to submerge, it is also true that in the popular Greek of NT times, the same word was used to refer to a number of different Jewish rites of purification involving washing."[21]

Some who agree that immersion was the primary mode of baptism in the early church point out that other modes were permitted. In the *Didache*, a manual of Christian faith and practice variously dated from 70-150 A.D., we read "Baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, in running water. But if thou hast not running water, baptize in other water. And if thou canst not in cold, then in warm. But if thou has neither, pour water three times upon the head in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (*Didache* 7.1).

William A. BeVier comments "This passage should make all the advocates of any mode today take notice.… The concept appears to be that any mode can be used, just so water is applied. The immersionists can well point out that their mode seems to have first choice (but one cannot even be dogmatic here), and it must also be noted that 'cold' and 'running' water would have precedence over any other, which excludes the modern heated baptistery.… the very tone of the *Didache* seems to allow a great amount of freedom as to mode and amount of water used."[22]

Historically, the Reformed tradition has held to this freedom and taught that the mode of baptism—immersing, pouring, or sprinkling—is a matter of indifference. This was the position of John Calvin, who wrote, "But whether the person who is baptized be wholly immersed, and whether thrice or once, or whether water be only poured or sprinkled upon him, is of no importance; Churches ought to be left at liberty in this respect."[23]

Where should we baptize?

In the Reformed tradition, the sacrament of baptism is normally performed by a minister in the presence of the congregation where the one to be baptized is a member. To be sure, there have always been exceptions, but this has been the general rule.

In his thought-provoking essay "Habitats of Infant Baptism," David F. Wright expands on this historic understanding, offering a series of intriguing observations linking baptism not only to the local congregation but also to the believing nuclear family.

> Infants do not bring themselves to baptism.… We may therefore regard the Christian family as an essential habitat—the essential microhabitat—of infant baptism. From this it follows that if the Christian identity of the family or the integrity of the family itself is insecure, infant baptism will not thrive as it ought.… Should baptism be expected to bear fruit in the lives of infants when the context which the Christian tradition has invariably held to be the God-assigned habitat for childbearing—the one-flesh union of marriage—is not operative?[24]

Wright deftly links the sacrament of baptism to two institutions that, at present, appear to be in decline: the family and the Church. Not surprisingly, all three have been the subject of sustained attacks within Protestant mainline denominations in recent decades. While space does not permit the exploration of Wright's thesis in detail, for those with ears to hear there is much to be learned from his analysis.

Conclusion

That baptism has been a topic of debate in the Church from the earliest Christian centuries until today is a measure of the sacrament's importance to Christian faith and life. Baptism touches on such vital questions as: How are we saved? What is the Church? and How are we to live as Christ's disciples in a world that loves the darkness and hates the light?

These are the broader and deeper questions we discuss as we debate the what, who, how, and where of baptism. And these discussions and debates must continue, for, to end with one last quote from David Wright, "We probably should not expect sacraments of

the gospel to thrive in an ecclesial context where the gospel itself is stunted or impoverished."[25]

[1] James Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 63.
[2] *Institutes*, 4.15.1.
[3] The Westminster Shorter Catechism defines a sacrament as "a holy ordinance instituted by Christ; wherein, by sensible signs, Christ, and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers" and teaches that "The sacraments of the New Testament are, baptism, and the Lord's Supper" (Questions 92-93).
[4] Donald Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), pp. 149, 151.
[5] Daniel Migliore, "Reforming the Theology and Practice of Baptism: The Challenge of Karl Barth," *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, eds. David Willis, Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 495.
[6] Hugh Thompson Kerr, *The Christian Sacraments: A Source Book for Ministers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1944), p. 57.
[7] Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*, pp. 66-67.
[8] Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred* (New York: Doubleday Image, 1982), p. 163.
[9] Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 515.
[10] Kerr, *The Christian Sacraments*, pp. 64-66.
[11] Migliore, "Reforming the Theology and Practice of Baptism," p. 499.
[12] Kerr, *The Christian Sacraments*, p. 64.
[13] Daniel Migliore, "Reforming the Theology and Practice of Baptism: The Challenge of Karl Barth," *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, Topics, Traditions*, eds. David Willis, Michael Welker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 496.
[14] McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 517.
[15] http://www.usmb.org/our-story-basic-principles-of-anabaptists-beliefs accessed 9/21/2013.
[16] McGrath, *Christian Theology*, p. 518.
[17] Bloesch, *The Church*, p. 158
[18] Donald Wilson Stake, *The ABCs of Worship: A Concise Dictionary* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 23-24.
[19] David F. Wright, "Habitats of Infant Baptism," *Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Thomas W. Gillespie*, ed. Wallace M. Alston, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 263-264.
[20] R.S. Rayburn, "Baptism, Modes of," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), p. 133.
[21] Hughes Oliphant Olds, "Baptism," *The Westminster Handbook to Reformed Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 15
[22] William A. BeVier, "Water Baptism in the Ancient Church: Part I," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 116, No. 462/April, 1959, p. 142.
[23] *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.15.19.
[24] David F. Wright, "Habitats of Infant Baptism," *Theology in Service of the Church: Essays in Honor of Thomas W. Gillespie*, ed. Wallace M. Alston, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 255, 258.
[25] Wright, "Habitats," p. 264.

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Abortion and the Sacraments

by Elizabeth Achtemeier

A Different People

"You are the light of the world." "You are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:14, 13). "[O]nce you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord" (Eph. 5:8). "We know that we have passed out of death into life…." (1 John 3:14). Throughout the New Testament, the followers of Jesus Christ who make up the Christian Church are those who live in newness of life. They are not those of the old age so characteristic of our world, with its death and destruction, its violence and its hatreds, its sins and its sorrows. Instead, Christians are those who live, at least partially, in a new age of life and justice, peace and love, goodness and joy. They are those who are no longer enslaved to the ways of this world, but are those who are given a foretaste of the freedom of the coming Kingdom of God. Though citizens of this earth, they stand with one foot in heaven, and they live not by their own powers, but by the powers of the triune Lord. We Christians are made to be different—different from the society and world around us, different in our actions, our thoughts, our world-view—different in whom we worship and what we treasure.

It has always been thus with the people of God. Previously, in the Old Testament, Israel was a nation set apart for God's purposes (Exod. 19:6), "not reckoning itself among the nations" (Num. 23:9), following not the ways of Egypt or Canaan, but the ways of the Lord (Lev. 18:1-5). And that unique character of the covenant

people continues into the New Testament. "Do not be conformed to this world…." writes Paul. Be different.

If we ask where such uniqueness comes from, then it is clear it comes from our God. We gather each Sunday morning, or more frequently, to worship an incomparable God, who is like no other deity known to human beings (cf. Isa. 40:18). He is not some numinous world soul who is known through the forces of nature (cf. Deu. 6:4; 1 Kings 19:11-12), not some mystic Om who is sensed as indefinable Other, not some ingrained spirit possessed by all human beings (cf. Hos. 11:9), not the power in crystal, pyramid, guru, magic charm or amulet (cf. Isa. 8:19; Deu. 18:10-11). No. He is the Lord solely revealed by his own words and actions to his people Israel, and finally incarnated in his fullness in his Son, Jesus Christ (John 10:30). "He who has seen me has seen the Father," that Son tells us (John 14:9), and so he reveals God's person—full of grace, glorious in majesty, Lord over nature and history, Power beyond all powers, King above all kings, just Judge and hater of evil, but unlimited in mercy and love. And he calls those who worship him to imitate his nature—an imitation defined by his sacrificial love in Jesus Christ (Eph. 5:1-2). Surely it is a call to every one of us Christian worshipers to be different in the world.

It is not easy to be different, however, not easy to be a unique people who are in the world but not of it. The world's ways call us to a life of comfort—at least they do so in this country. Despite the sufferings and worries that everyone goes through, our physical necessities are usually met and the daily rounds of our lives are for the most part stable. So it is tempting to live as our society lives, to adopt the goal of the accumulation of things, the relativistic definitions of right and wrong, the bogus freedom of everyone for himself, and the indifferent acceptance of every lifestyle. And if we don't, our society makes us suffer for it. The ways of God and goodness are out of fashion in our country, and we are set against the tide if we try to live a distinctly Christian life, with God as Lord over what we do. According to God's ways, humility and not self-centered pride has to become our stance. We have to depend on a Word and a Presence not found in ourselves. We lose control of our own days and destinies. Justice, mercy, love like Christ's become our goals, and we are subject to the ridiculous necessity of forgiving our enemies and loving the weak and believing that the meek shall inherit the earth. Surely no things are more difficult in twentieth century America!

Perhaps no problem presents us more clearly with the radical Christian call to be in the world but not of it than does our present society's wrestling over the issue of abortion. Our society's views, or at least those of our government, on the issue are very clear—no woman who desires an abortion should be hindered in her right to obtain it. To be sure, the majority of Americans harbor doubts about the advisability of such laws, and many want some limits put on the ability to obtain the operation. Equally, many women agonize over their decision when they consider undergoing the procedure. Yet the siren song of our society is very strong: women should be able to maintain control over their bodies and personal lives; lifestyles, education, future plans should be undisturbed and left in comfort; the weak and helpless can be sacrificed to the able; there are some who will never contribute to the material wealth of the nation or who will cost it money, and who therefore should be eliminated. Control, comfort, ability, wealth—these characterize the goals of our society and prop up the demands for abortion rights. And everyone of them contradicts the unique life asked of Christians, for Christians are called to turn over control of their lives to God in Jesus Christ and to look for all their ability and welfare from their Lord. Especially is that Christian contradiction odious to many radical feminists, for they are fighting their battles specifically for power and control, and the Christian requirement to give up those rights brings forth only their scorn.

God's Desire that We Live

That there is final wisdom in the Christian faith comes sharply into focus, however, when we consider the ultimate contradiction that the Christian faith makes to our society. Over-against the death-dealing ways of the world and the finality of the grave for all of us, the God of the Bible sets the contradiction of life abundant and eternal. If there is one fact that characterizes the biblical narrative, it is God's desire that we live. "[C]hoose life, that you and your descendants may live" (Deu. 30:19); "I have no pleasure in the death of anyone" (Ezek. 18:32); "I am the bread of life" (John 6:48); "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10); "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28). God wants us to live and not to die. And so finally he bursts the tombs of earth with the resurrection of his Son and renders death's darkness impotent to hold us, and gives to everyone who trusts his victory the gift of eternal life. Plainly, as our Lord Jesus taught us, when we lose our life—that is, when we surrender it into the hands of God—we save it (Mark 8:35 and parallels). For our God is the God who gives life instead of the death of the world.

Right there, it seems to me, is the most radical contradiction to abortion—that God desires that all persons, whom he has created, live and not die. And surely the child in the womb is included in that number, for "it is he that made us, and we are his" (Ps. 100:3).

He clothed us with skin and flesh and knit us together with bones and sinews (Job 10:11), until we emerged the wondrous, unique creatures that we are, each with our own DNA and fingerprints, our stature and our special voice. We clever human beings may fertilize human eggs in a petri dish or even clone ourselves, but God furnished the initial cells and the DNA, and apart from his creation of life, our science would be impossible. We come from God, and his purpose for all of us—born and unborn—is that we live.

The Christian faith calls us, therefore, to that life-giving surrender to our Father, in which we trust his purpose in making us and our unborn children in the first place, and then further rely on him to guide and provide for us and our child, no matter what our circumstances. Yes, children interrupt our lifestyle and comfort; they require our money; some of them may seem to have the most dismal futures; and goodness knows, we never can control them, much less ourselves, to our satisfaction. But God has willed our children in his creative purpose and we continue to trust him with our lives and theirs. That trust is the way of life and not the way of death. And it is radically different from the ways of the world.

Baptism Into Life

Are all of these facts not those that we confess when we and our children are baptized? Baptism is initiation into the different life of the Christian faith, and it shares all of those characteristics.

First and foremost, baptism is God's act toward us—the fact that distinguishes sacraments from our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving and offerings to God. In sacrifices, we act toward God. In sacraments God acts toward us. And so baptism is God's objective pouring out of his grace upon us. It is not primarily parents' or sponsors' dedication of a person to God, and it is not simply a christening whereby a Christian name is bestowed. No. Baptism is God's act of giving of himself to us. "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit..." (John 15:16).

And what is the nature of the gifts that God gives in baptism? He bestows on us his Holy Spirit, his active working of himself within us. Every baptismal ceremony, therefore, asks first for the gift of the Spirit. And by that Spirit, then, we are given newness of life, as if we had undergone a whole new birth (cf. John 3:1-10). We are removed from the old way of life and set into the new, and we receive such a gift because the Spirit is the Spirit of the risen Christ.

Do you not know," writes Paul, "that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3-4). In short, for every baptized Christian, the old life of the old age is gone. The ways of the world and our participation in them have been forgiven, and by the death and resurrection of our Lord, we have been given a new start in the new age of God's coming kingdom. "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). As Karl Barth once remarked, "Life doesn't begin with birth; it begins with baptism." And Christians have passed, though still imperfectly, in their baptisms, into that new world that is different from our old.

Moreover, by the Spirit given in baptism we Christians are given the risen Christ's power to live the radically new life. Certainly, weighed down by the temptations and turmoils of our society's old ways, we by ourselves have neither the desire nor the power to live differently. But because we have been baptized by the Father into Christ Jesus by the Spirit, it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives and works in us (cf. Gal. 2:20). And he has triumphed over all of the old world's evil ways. The baptized have the power, in Christ alone, to live in newness of life.

Baptism as Redemption and Adoption

The New Testament states that fact in the figure of redemption. To be "redeemed" in the Bible is to be bought back from slavery (cf. Lev. 25:47-52). And we have been bought back from our slavery to sin and death by the "redemption which is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). "In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us" (Eph. 1:7). By Christ's death and his resurrection, God "has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sin" (Col. 1:13-14). The old age has been overcome and the new inaugurated, and we are participants in it.

For that reason, baptism further signifies, as an outward visible act, the fact that the baptized person now belongs to God. There is no thought in baptism that we are our own person, responsible only to ourselves and managing our own lives, as our society seems to think. No. The baptized person belongs to God, as his child (cf. John 1:12). He or she has been adopted into God's family. He or she has been set apart by the family name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He or she can now call God "Father" in the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

In baptism, God now reclaims the child whom he created in the beginning, but who wandered away in sin or, in the case of an infant, who was born into a sinful world (cf. Ps. 51:5), and now that child belongs to God and to no other. And nothing now can snatch that child away from God's hand. The evil principalities and powers of the world no longer hold the baptized captive. Indeed, we are assured by the Apostle Paul that nothing now can separate the baptized from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38). To be sure, we baptized Christians continue sometimes to forget our Father and to fall often into sin, wandering away like some prodigals, with all the inheritance of God's promises in our pockets (cf. Gal. 4:7). But the Father waits eagerly each day for our return, and welcomes us always into his household, because he is rich in mercy toward his children whom he has adopted as his own.

The Challenge of Baptism

Given these facts about baptism, the question arises, then, why it is that the church continues to sanction those ways of the old age, including abortion, that belong to the world with its darkness. Obviously no child, born or unborn, is ours to do with what we like. The child belongs to God; we affirm that unconditionally in baptism. And just as obviously, we no longer need be captive to the ways of the old age. Our sins and deaths are overcome, and Christ's Spirit is poured out upon us. In faith, we therefore have the power to live in newness of life, to trust the Father, even in a "problem pregnancy," and to walk in the ways of his new age of the kingdom. Why then do we persist in living as if we have never been redeemed, slaughtering our unborn children and thinking that we have to provide for ourselves and them, all on our own? Christ died and rose again—those events have taken place. Why do we continue to ignore their benefits?

There is more to consider, however. We are not just baptized as individuals, but are anointed with water and the Spirit into a community—into the one universal Christian Church. We thereby are given a history—a history that was prepared amidst a bunch of Semitic slaves in ancient Egypt, that was dreamed of by prophets in places like Anathoth and Moresheth and Babylon, and that took shape among a little group of men and women gathered together for prayer in an upper room in Jerusalem. That history has spanned twenty centuries since biblical times and has included persons from every race and nation. And that history will continue long after we have made our little contributions to it. So you and I now have a sacred past and a sacred future in the purposes of God, and it is God's intention that we incorporate into that future history every child who comes forth from the womb. "For the promise (of forgiveness and baptism) is to you and to your children and to all that are far off" (Acts 2:39). There is no thought that we should erase the future life of any child created to be incorporated into God's history.

More than that, far from being on our own, we are participants in a confessing company of saints and prophets, wise men and shepherds, psalmists and historians, apostles and disciples, monks and nuns, evangelists and servants, and a whole motley crew of sinners across the earth, who are just like ourselves. All have been baptized into Christ Jesus. And we are bidden by our Lord to draw all persons whom he has made into that company (Matt. 28:20).

The result is that we take responsibility for one another in the community of the church. Whenever a person is baptized, not only do the parents or sponsors take vows, but the present congregation takes them also. And they promise to nurture and to love one another in the power of Christ's Spirit, to help each other grow in sanctification and to live lives of example to one another. Does that not say something to us baptized Christians about our ministry toward those with "problem pregnancies"—to the unwed mother, the poor woman struggling with too many children, the ashamed, the fearful, and yes, the indifferent, who plans easily to be rid of her pregnancy? Does it not say something to us about the teaching we give in the church concerning sex and marriage? And does it not equally lay upon us baptized souls the responsibility for every child in the womb and out? As Paul constantly reminds the Corinthians, we need to live up to our baptisms! Indeed, perhaps we need to rethink our entire attitudes toward abortion and the ways of our society's life in the old age. For we are not of the way of darkness, but of the way of light in Christ Jesus. And he is our Lord who wills life for all and not death. Life—abundant, eternal—that must be the goal of Christ's church.

The Lord's Supper

Had we only all of these facts of our baptisms to go on, we might feel bereft, like those first disciples who stood gazing bewilderedly into heaven when the risen Christ was taken up in his ascension (Acts 1:9-10). Then we would have only the memory of what God had done to us in the past in our baptisms to fortify our endeavors. It is hard to live the life of the new age of the kingdom on the strength of memory alone. But Jesus promised his disciples that he would not leave them desolate, but come again to them (John 14:18), and it is in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper that his promise is time and again fulfilled. The Scriptures tell us that Christ is with us always to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). But the eucharistic sacrament forms the heart of that communion. At the table of the Lord's Supper, we

commune with Christ. His is a "real presence" with us, and by the symbols of the bread and the wine, we participate in his very being. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation—(a communion, a sharing)—in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 10:16)? "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them" (John 6:56). Through the Supper, we live in Christ and Christ lives in us, and we are lent his risen, newness of life.

All the gifts of baptism are included in that gift—our forgiveness, our redemption from sin and death, our receipt of Christ's Spirit, our resurrection into new life, our adoption into the family of God from whose hand we cannot be loosed, our participation in the history of God's ongoing universal purpose, our future of eternal life. All those acts wrought by God in the past are not just remembered, but are rendered anew in the present, as God in Christ works in us here and now through the sacrament. It is no wonder that the Lord's Supper is called "the feast of God for the people of God," for our past baptisms into the church are rendered no longer past but present.

It is in the Supper, therefore, that we once again, in repentance and faith, vow to live the new life in Christ and not the old life of our sinful world. It is in the Supper that we renew our covenant with our Lord, for from its beginning, the Lord's Supper has been a covenant meal. Its forerunner in the Bible is that covenant meal of Moses and the elders of Israel, eating and drinking with God on Mt. Sinai (Ex. 24:9-11). Its historical precedent is Christ's last supper with his disciples before he goes out to be crucified (Mark 14:1-15 and parallels). But noteworthy from the beginning is the fact that those who eat and drink with God make the covenant promise, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Ex. 19:8; 24:7). Thus, the classic introduction to the Lord's Supper in the church has been the vow on the part of the people to walk in newness of life.

> Ye who do truly and earnestly repent of your sins, and are in love and charity with your neighbors, and intend to live a new life following the commandments of God, and walking from henceforth in his holy ways: Draw near with faith, and take this Holy Sacrament to your comfort; and make your humble confession to Almighty God. (*The Book of Common Worship*, 1946).

The church used to have a preparatory service of repentance in which the congregation prepared its hearts and minds to receive that invitation and to walk anew in God's ways. Now the custom is sometimes to read the Ten Commandments at the beginning of the communion service itself, in order that the people may examine their hearts. Then the service proceeds with the confession of sin. But whatever the approach, our vow in the covenant service of communion is to turn and to live the new life in Christ. We all come as sinners to the celebration of the Lord's Supper—and no baptized sinner need feel that he or she is unworthy, not even those who have participated in some way in the abortive murder of an unborn child. With God is plenteous mercy. But the Supper stands as the guard, after baptism, to persistence in sinful backsliding, and it offers to all the opportunity of living the new life in Christ, because it incorporates us into him.

Communion with Neighbor and Saint

We not only commune with Christ in the Lord's Supper, however. We also commune with one another, and there once again, as at our baptisms, we take on the responsibility for one another's lives. How can I possibly be at one with my neighbor if I ignore her need in her problem pregnancy? If she is unwed, I cannot condemn her. If she is alone, I cannot fail to give her friendship and support. If she is poor, I cannot fail to supply her need. The persons surrounding me in the pews at the Supper have multiple anxieties and troubles—sometimes guilts, sometimes ignorance, sometimes weaknesses—as do I. All of us have failed to live up to our baptisms. But in the forgiveness, the renewal, the vitality, the love of Christ, we are bound together as one in the Supper, and that is the new energy that sets the people to minister to one another. Just what is your church doing to help those with difficult and problem pregnancies? What is it doing to guide young people to use their sexuality according to the ways of God? What is it doing to welcome the new child, born to a mother in impoverished or unpromising circumstances? Anything at all? For years, most congregations have closed our minds to these questions and said, "Those are not our problems." But the Lord's Supper makes us all one, and as Paul writes, "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor. 12:26).

At the table of the Lord, we not only commune with those present, however. We also commune with all that great company of faithful who have gone before us in the "communion of the saints." We are bound together with Abraham and Moses, Isaiah and Peter, Mary Magdalene and Mother Teresa, indeed, with every faithful soul who has confessed the Lordship of Jesus Christ and passed on to Christ's eternal life. And yes, we commune with our deceased, Christian loved ones—with our parents who have died, and the friends we have buried, and all those whom we have so cherished. At the table of the Lord, we commune with the mothers who did not abort us, but who were willing to bring us forth to life. And we commune with the fathers who

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paid the bills and played with us and guided our years, and who loved us so very much. That whole marvelous company of life—all the motley, mixed, milling multitude of it—eats and drinks with us at Christ's table, and we are one with them in faith and in the love of Jesus our Lord.

That vast company brings with it to the table their witness from the past—Martin Luther's words: "…those who have no regard for pregnant women and who do not spare the tender fruit are murderers and infanticides."[1] And there is the witness of Calvin:

> If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house than in a field, because a man's house is his most secure place of refuge, it ought surely to be deemed more atrocious to destroy the unborn in the womb before it comes to light.[2]

And those are only a small sample of the words against abortion that come to us from that great cloud of witnesses from the past that commune with us at the Supper. Can we eat and drink with them in integrity since the passing of *Roe v. Wade* or since the government approval of partial birth abortion? Can our congregation? Surely our participation in the body and blood of Jesus Christ demands a new life that does not follow the ways of the old!

Thanksgiving and Future Kingdom

The Lord's Supper is called the eucharist, however, and that means "thanksgiving," stemming from the Greek *eucharisto*, "to give thanks." And out of all of our heartfelt penitence for our sin in the past and for our easy acceptance of the old ways of our world, there emerges from the celebration of the Lord's Supper finally good news. For the Supper is our Lord's gracious invitation made possible to live a new and abundant life. There at his table he mercifully forgives us once again. Eating and drinking with him he wipes clean the past, and pours into our bodies and souls his risen life, full of vitality that never dies and love that never ends. By his Spirit we are once again born anew and made whole. By his Spirit we can think and do what is good. By his Spirit, he pours out upon us those clean, refreshing, bubbling waters that well up to eternal life (John 4:14) and that allow us, indeed, to celebrate life, marvelous life!

Our Lord tells us at the last supper with his disciples, "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you…." (Matt. 22:15). Our Lord eagerly desires that we live! And later he adds, "I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matt. 26:29). The Lord's Supper looks toward the future, not the future of this darkened and sin-pocked world with its ways leading to death, but to the future of the Kingdom of God when all things have been made new and all things in heaven and earth have been united in one great communion of life (Eph. 1:10). Then, the Scriptures tell us, abortion and its sufferings, evil and its ways, will have been done away for good. God himself will be with us, and we shall be his people. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning or crying nor pain any more, for the former things will have passed away (Rev. 21:3-4). The Creator and Giver of all life, and his risen Son will be the victors. And the God of life will have banished this world's death forever!

[1] *What Luther Says : An Anthology*. Compiled by Ewald M. Plass. St. Louis : Concordia Publishing House , 1 95 9, Vol. 2, No . 2826,p . 9 05 .
[2] *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses* . Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950, pp . 4 1- 42.

This article first appeared in Theology Matters *in May/Jun 1999, Vol 5, No. 3. At that time Dr. Achtemeier (1926-2002) was a retired adjunct professor of homiletics and OT from Union Theological Seminary in Richmond. She co-authored with Terry Schlossberg,* Not My Own: Abortion and the Marks of the Church.