

Baptism – Life By Drowning

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2005

Excerpt

4.1 A gift of grace

Baptism is a gift of God's grace to the church. It is (very likely) instituted by Jesus to mark a person's entry into the new covenant with God and with God's people.

4.2 An effective sign

Baptism is the sign of all that God has done for us in creation, covenant, Christ, church and coming Reign of God. It dramatises our central story, tells us who we are, calls us to repentance and plunges us [pun intended] into discipleship. The New Testament images surrounding baptism (death/resurrection, recloting, washing etc) speak of new life in Christ. Baptism is the sign of the person's pardoning, cleansing and receiving the Holy Spirit. As such, baptism is a sign of the coming reign of God in our midst. It is not, therefore, primarily about how we feel, but it goes much deeper, to who we are, and whose we are, to the marrow of our being, the depths of our soul. It makes us new people in Christ.

Furthermore, it is a sign which actually accomplishes what it signifies; it is an effective sign. In theological terms, baptised persons are related to God in a new and different way; they are newly created, they recommence the Christian story in the way it was meant to go. In psychological terms, baptism ought to be celebrated with powerful symbolics and psychic costliness. In sociological terms, baptism ingrafts the person into God's people. As such, it creates the community. What defines the Christian community is not, in the first place, ideology, or common feeling, or polity, or even agreement on points of theology, but engagement with God, death and resurrection, forgiveness and hope.

4.3 Baptism reshapes the person and the community

Baptism, whilst a gift of God, transforms the one being baptised and brings about obedience and life-long growth in personal maturity, witness and service. It produces a life centred on nothing other than the worship of the Triune God. The baptised life is one of submission to being reshaped by the Spirit into the likeness of Christ. It drowns the old personality, so that out of what has been killed, a new person can grow. We have a new character, a new identity – we are literally new creations. The baptised life is therefore the cross-bearing life. As Christ is one with the hungry and poor and wretched of the earth, so are those who have been baptised into his life. To nourish us, Christ's baptised people are constantly fed by word, bread and wine. The eucharist recapitulates the baptismal covenant. It continues to transform us in the likeness of Christ, as we feed on his murdered body and drink his blood and thus participate in his risen life.² Consequently, the baptised life is never static, but always being refashioned and remade into Christ-likeness.

4.4 God's gift to the church for the world

Baptism is a gift to the church and administered within the church. While baptism and eucharist are not for the world, but for the church, like all God's gifts, baptism is given for the sake of the whole creation. Richard Norris puts it well:

The Church is the community which lives out the life whose seed and beginning is Baptism; it is a social explication of the meaning of Baptism, a meaning that is enacted and so reiterated weekly ... in the sacred meal.

He goes on to say that the church is a community whose business it is constantly to rehearse a divinely authored play whose first actual, full performance will occur in the Age to Come.

A renewed theology of baptism is therefore inevitably a renewal of the mission of the church. Christ commands the church to make disciples and baptise, and thus to participate in the renewal of all creation. Could not a renewal of baptismal identity help us to overcome our embarrassment about being Christian, our loss of public language about the faith, our failure (unlike people of other faiths) to express our allegiance in identity markers and regular practices?

In the early church (second to fourth centuries), the initiatory process took at least three years. The congregation took upon itself the serious and joyful task of refashioning the new Christian into the likeness of Jesus. It welcomed her, embraced her and loved her enough not to leave her floundering to find her own identity, or to do her own work of allowing the faith to transform her worldview and every corner of her life. It showed her hospitality, it carefully explained the story, the church provided her with a companion, it prayed for her, agonised with her, fasted with her, helped her find a new vocation. And only then did it baptise her and admit her to the holy meal. The reshaping of the identity is no light thing.

Once Christianity became the established religion in Europe, infant baptism became more the mark of citizenship. To be a citizen was to be a Christian and vice versa. Jews were not fully citizens. Pagans were on the outside of the Empire threatening Christendom's fabric – the Muslims. Christians were no longer differentiated from others in society. Baptism was no longer a mark of cross-carrying, of living by alternative loyalties, in an alternative society with alternative values; baptism largely degenerated into being simply a naming ceremony marking a rite of passage for a family which was now a bit different because it had a new member. Alongside of this developed the superstition that the sprinkling with water in a liturgical context was to purchase a ticket to heaven, and fire insurance against the other place.

In the post-Christendom context, we can no longer rely on shared cultural understandings about basic beliefs, ethics or spirituality – these are, to a considerable extent, no longer Christian, if they ever were. These have to be inculcated carefully and thoroughly. We therefore find that the inspired wisdom of the early church about the making of Christians needs to be recovered and adapted to our contemporary situation.

In the post-Christendom context, Christians can again be assured of their unique identity as, what Willimon and Hauerwas, following 1 Peter, called, “resident aliens”:

- people who, in theological terms, have been accepted by the Father because of the life, death, resurrection and glorification of the Son in the power of the Spirit;
- people who, in psychological terms, have been reborn, enlightened, refashioned, remade into the likeness of Christ;
- people who, in sociological terms, have now received their naturalisation certificate, or better, their adoption papers into the reign of God and are full members of God’s forgiven but yet imperfect people – the Church, and who therefore live lives of costly discipleship.

We are, by God’s grace, a converted people, a transformed people, a distinctive people, “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people.... once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people” (1 Peter 2:9,10). Our primary loyalty is not to Australia, but to God. Our primary community is not our family, but God’s family. Our values are informed, not by some insipid middle-class standards of respectability, but by the reign of God as announced, lived and proclaimed by Jesus and the apostles. We are a people shaped not by some mediocre consensus of society, but by Word, water, bread and wine. We are a reborn people, a people who know our identity.

As William Willimon writes:

When you ask in desperation, “Who, in God’s name, am I?” baptism will have you feel water dripping from your head and the oil oozing down your neck and say, “You are, in God’s name, royalty, God’s own, claimed and ordained for God’s serious and joyful business.”

5.3 Birthing new Christians

The church looks towards the Reign of God, waits for it, proclaims it and makes pilgrimage towards it. The church is an anticipatory sign of the Reign of God. (Hans Küng). In short, the church’s duty and call is to serve the reign of God as its herald, witness, demonstrator and messenger. The church is not the goal of the Gospel; but is called to be its “instrument and witness” (Darrell Guder)

Evangelism is best understood as “that set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time” (William Abraham). A key component of that is birthing new Christians, as the Spirit gives new life. This is not a task to be undertaken easily or simply. Whatever the benefits and compromises of Christendom, it is no longer with us, except by way of a few anachronistic vestiges – such as indiscriminate baptism, baptism on demand and baptism without discipleship.

This birthing of Christians is a primary function of the church. It is, then, Baptism in which the mother, the Church, gives birth to these children – that is, to newborn children of God, who share the status of the Son of God and gladly accept the training, the paideia, that their much elder sibling lavishes on them (Richard Norris).

Given the radical transformation that the person undergoes in the conversion process, we cannot take this lightly. A few conversations with the minister, or a half dozen “confirmation

classes” no longer cut it for people who have little or no knowledge of the Christian story, who have no comprehension of Jesus or the reign of God he inaugurated, who have little understanding of the church as an alternative society, who have little idea of practices to sustain the Christian life. We are again like the early church in the situation where we need to love people enough to initiate them carefully into the reign of God, to help them experience the Christian liturgy and to plumb its depths, to allow time for the Holy Spirit to do her transforming work so that people will indeed be “new creations”. In other words, we need a renewed catechumenate which draws on the wisdom of the ancient church, but adapts it for the current context.

Only then will we have a church of disciples rather than consumers, a church of which offers a genuine robust alternative to the death-dealing practices and values of what Walter Wink has called “the domination system”, a church which witnesses to none other than Jesus the Christ.

Such catechesis needs to include:

- a. **learning the Christian story .**
Narrative shapes world view. It also shatters and reshapes old ones. Jesus knew the power of stories and told them masterfully. The sermons we have in Acts are largely narratives of God’s doings.
- b. **learning the basics of Christian theology.**
Who is Jesus? What are the key beliefs which the Church holds in common and distinguishes us from other faiths? How are we to understand the creeds within a present-day world view etc?
- c. **learning the Christian ethic.**
Forgiveness, care for the needy, justice, treating all people equally, sharing – these do not come naturally and need to be acquired and supported within the community.
- d. **learning Christian practices.**
Learning to live a life of praise, worship, personal Scripture reading and prayer, fasting, tithing – these also do not come naturally and have to be learned.