

“There Is Meaning in Our Mode of Baptism”

Romans 6:1-11

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There are many different ways to practice baptism, many modes, as they are called. And many people think this is what defines Baptists, that we practice baptism by immersion. But while we do now, early Baptists poured at first and only later decided to practice immersion. The issue for them was who was being baptized, the subject, not the mode. The concern was that the candidate be old enough to confess faith for him/herself. Hence the term – “believer’s baptism”.

Interestingly enough, the earliest extracanonical teaching about baptism, found in the Didache, dated to the second century, allows for flexibility in regard to the mode. It says this. “Having first rehearsed these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, in living water (not we have...). But if you have not living water, baptize into other water; and, if thou canst not in cold, in warm. If you have neither, pour water thrice on the head in the name, etc....”

So, from the very beginning, there are options - a preference for immersion, but room for accommodation, and each mode has specific meaning. For example, pouring offers a sign of the Spirit descending on us, as the Spirit descends like a dove on Jesus at baptism. Now, not every baptismal act is driven by meaning. A member of another church I served was baptized in a river and moved around in circles as she was. The pastor explained later that he did this to move her away from a water moccasin! Such are the risks of living water...

But the way we baptize, not just immersing the candidate, but doing so backwards, has meaning. It is rooted in the passage we have read from Romans 6. We are visually putting into practice what the Apostle Paul describes with words when he says that we are buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life. It is a wonderful image, a visual testimony! There is meaning in our mode, rich meaning, a visual image not just of salvation, but of Christian life as a whole.

Part of the image involves being buried with Christ, dying to old ways of life. The early church took this matter seriously, considering not only certain behaviors but certain professions as inappropriate for Christians. And during the period of preparation for baptism, members of the church would observe the candidates, and if they did not reveal a change in character, they would not be baptized. I am not suggesting we implement this practice today, but it underscores the need to put away old habits not in keeping with Christian discipleship.

Perhaps an illustration can help. In another setting, one boy in a family told his mother he was ready to be baptized. She was delighted at this prospect, but also concerned that he knew what he was doing. She told him this involved asking Jesus into your heart. "I know," he said. "Well," she continued, "If Jesus is living in your heart, you don't want to do certain things anymore, like hit your brothers when you are mad at them." "I know," he said, still expressing a desire to be baptized.

There were further conversations within the family and with ministers and eventually he was baptized. A few weeks after his baptism, his mother found him yelling at one of his brothers and hitting him. "I thought you asked Jesus into your heart?" she asked in exasperation, to which he replied, "Oh, I asked him to get out."

Well, it doesn't really work that way... It's not than any of us achieves perfection in this realm. Letting go of old habits not in keeping with our journey with Christ is ever a work in progress. We are all a bit like the character, Sethe, in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, an escaped slave who is free now, but is ever beating back her memories of a painful past. We are ever beating back our old ways, with God's help.

Even in the early church, this is the case. For example, fourth-century Archbishop of Constantinople, John Chrysotom, in his baptismal instructions, expresses great frustration that some of the new converts are not in class learning about how to follow Jesus, but have chosen to do other things, like go to the horseraces. Some things never change, including the fact that the good preacher takes out his frustration on the faithful who are present, not those who have fallen back on old ways.

Christian growth is an ongoing process, it takes constant effort to put away the past, but we do want to put it away, and we can with God's

help. Martin Luther put it this way. “We must hold boldly and fearlessly to our baptism, and hold it up against all sins and terrors of conscience, and humbly say, ‘I know full well that I have not a single work which is pure, but I am baptized, and through my baptism, God, who cannot lie, has bound [Godself] in a covenant with me, not to count my sin against me, but to slay it and blot it out.’”

Whenever Luther was tempted to fall back into his old ways, he would say to himself, “But I am baptized...” and he would remember his identity and calling. The first part of this image of salvation and Christian life involves being buried with Christ, dying to old ways.

The second part involves rising with Christ to new life, taking on new ways. It is not enough simply to avoid the bad and destructive; we are called to pursue the good and noble – Jesus’ ways of love and kindness, mercy and compassion, justice and peace. We are called to rise from the waters of baptism to live in a different way.

Sometimes we do, sometimes we do not. I will never forget the comment of a woman in another setting. In the midst of a Wednesday night dialogue, she said, “You can always tell who the Christians are because they are ones who let you out in traffic.” If only it were so... There are goodhearted people who are kind on the roads. Sometimes fellow Christians are included in this number, sometimes they are not.

A seminary professor offered a confession with which many of us can identify. He was preaching a sermon on the challenge of loving as Jesus loves. He confessed that just that week he was looking for a parking space at the Mall and as he finally identified a space, someone quickly pulled in before him. He started to roll down his window and yell when he saw an elderly person get out and had a change of heart. Then, he thought to himself, “Here I am preparing a sermon on love and I’m about to explode on someone over a parking space.”

It happens to all of us. We aspire to something more, something better, but it’s difficult to love as Christ loves. We might bring ourselves to do the truly noble thing in the big moment, serve others on a mission trip. We might be willing to give of ourselves when it doesn’t cost anything. We might do the right thing when all is calm and

peaceful. But being kind to others in the ordinary grind of everyday life, sharing what we have when it does cost us, extending love and compassion in the heat of a conflict, is quite another thing.

An Imam and Muslim community in London showed us this week what a new and better life looks like. After a man had driven his van into their prayer meeting, hoping to kill as many Muslims as possible, the crowd apprehended the man and at first threatened to harm him. How would we react if a terrorist assaulted us here and we had a chance to harm him in return? But on the insistence of the Imam, they did not harm the man, but rather restrained him until the police arrived.

It was a Christlike response, and being willing to acknowledge that, being willing to see the good in the world wherever it exists, is Christlike too. We are called to be different. In the reading from Matthew, Jesus says his way is so different it will divide friends and family. It is the way of turning the other cheek and forgiving those who harm us. It is the way of loving our neighbor and welcoming the stranger. It is the way of pursuing justice in all that we say and do. It is the way of giving up self-interest so as to discover our truest self.

It is, again, an ongoing process, but just as we are called to be buried with Christ, to die to old ways; we are called to rise with Christ, to take on new ways.

But this is not all there is to the image we find in Romans 6. This is not just a mechanical description of adjusting our beliefs and practices. What the Apostle Paul is talking about here is a profound mystical reality wherein we participate in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We are buried with Christ, Paul says, baptized into his death, and we are raised with Christ, united with him in a resurrection like his.

What he is saying cannot be explained because it is a mystery, but it has something to do with an intimate connection to Christ. In baptism, we identify with Jesus' way of life, we embrace his death and the grace God extends to us, and we experience resurrection with him, not just life after death, but a whole new way of life right now.

These words about dying and rising have all the practical applications we have named. Paul begins this passage by naming the

assumption some seem to have that since God extends grace to us, we can live any way we want. This is not the case, he insists, we are to give up the old ways and take on the new, not indulge in sin. But there is more than practical application here, there is spiritual mystery, and if we are to make progress with the practical details, we will have to embrace the spiritual mystery, this intimate connection to Christ.

Reading this text is like looking at a 3D image. It is easy to see what is readily visible in two dimensions, but if we learn how to relax our eyes, we can see the 3D image which is the best part of the image. Such is the case with Paul's words to the church at Rome. It is easy to understand what is involved in dying to old ways and rising to new ones, but if we can tune in to the deeper spiritual reality of mystical connection to Christ, we can find what we need to die and rise.

Thomas Merton put it this way. "As a magnifying glass concentrates the rays of the sun into a little burning knot of heat that can set fire to a dry leaf or a piece of paper, so the mystery of Christ in the Gospel concentrates the rays of God's light and fire to a point that sets fire to the spirit of man [and woman] (*New Seeds of Contemplation*, page 150)." That is what we seek in baptism and the whole of Christian life – the mystery of Christ and the Gospel setting fire to our spirit!

While leading worship at Union Presbyterian Seminary, a doctoral classmate of mine put his fingers in a baptismal font and said, "What do I have here?" I replied, "Not enough water." I was kidding, there are different ways to go about baptism. But most of my more liturgical colleagues confess a preference for immersion, however it is performed.

Going backward presents a visual image of Paul's teaching, but just being immersed, fully immersed not just in water, but in Christ and his ways, is what we are after. We don't want just a little bit of this life, we want it all, unless we are like knights of the crusades who were baptized with their sword hand out of the water...

The way we practice baptism provides a symbol of Christian life. We go all the way under. We give up old ways and take on news ones. Most of all, we become intimately connected to Christ in a way we cannot explain, but because we do, our lives are transformed.