

Reflections on Baptism

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Few practices in the history of Christianity have caused more controversy than baptism. In the early days of Christianity converts were immersed in a stream or body of water to symbolize death and burial to an old way of life. Coming up out of the water symbolized the wonder and joy of resurrection to a new life in Christ, and eventually to eternal life in the world to come.

Gradually the Church altered this mode of baptism. Often large bodies of water were not available for total immersion of the human body. People who were ill or disabled needed to be baptized, perhaps in a hospital or on a battlefield. The Church decided that it was not so much the *amount* of water that mattered, but rather the symbolism of water as an agent of cleansing and renewal. So baptism by pouring became the more common practice.

Also, in the early days of Christianity converts were nearly always adults who were making a very distinct break with the pagan culture around them. Their baptism was a momentous event in their adult lives, as they often had to turn away from family and friends, renouncing the old way of life for their new-found faith. Marking this passage with a ritual representing death, burial, and resurrection was a powerful witness, and the Church has never meant to change this original meaning of baptism. However, many have argued that baptism by immersion portrays the essence of baptism as death and resurrection much better than merely pouring. (*Baptizo* in Greek means “to immerse.”) Some may not be aware that in the *Book of Common Prayer*, page 307, the rubric states that immersion is a permissible form of baptism, along with pouring.

In succeeding generations conditions became very different. Now children were being born into families which were already followers of Christianity. These children experienced no radical break with the culture around them, as their ancestors had. They were simply brought up as Christians; there was no crucial turning point of conversion. So when was the appropriate time to baptize them? Once again, the Church recognized

this issue, and adopted the view that baptism of the child as soon as possible after birth was appropriate, to symbolize that God's grace and love were always there for every human being from the very beginning. There was no point at which God's Spirit was infused into them, as if it had not been there before. Thus, the transition was made from adult baptism to so-called infant baptism, and this became the normative practice.

Comes the Reformation! In this period many traditional practices were questioned. Change, reform, and the much-needed correction of abuses in the Church were the order of the day. The Bible began to be printed in the native languages of people, so they could study the life and thought of the early Church for themselves. Several reforming groups discovered that baptism had originally been administered mostly to adults who made a definite decision to convert to Christianity, and that the original mode of baptism was usually total immersion in water. They decided that all other approaches to baptism were therefore invalid and unscriptural. They began to re-baptize everyone who joined their movement, using only the mode of immersion. They were given the name "Anabaptists," from Greek words meaning "to baptize again," and this was later shortened simply to the word "Baptist."

Two distinct theologies of baptism thus were crystalized over the course of Christian history: one has been labeled "believer's baptism," and the other "infant baptism." Bitter debates raged over these competing viewpoints, and it remains a live issue for many today. Both actually represent legitimate perspectives about our relationship to God.

On the one hand, we believe that God's grace is available for every human being from the beginning of life. Therefore, what could be more appropriate than to baptize a person as soon as possible after birth? This is the theological ground of "infant" baptism. On the other hand, as we grow and mature, we have to make numerous choices about our life and our beliefs. To become truly and authentically Christian, we have to decide for Christ ourselves, rather than just accept uncritically something handed on to us by parents. So-called "believer's" baptism recognizes this and marks our

more mature, adult choice of Christian faith by baptizing people at that point of personal decision.

Each viewpoint is holding up something of importance in our understanding of faith development. In our Episcopal tradition, we have recognized the second part of this equation, our adult decision-making, with the rite of Confirmation. It acknowledges our need to make a choice for God. However, we believe that it is crucially important to recognize through early baptism what the theologians call “prevenient grace,” that loving favor of God which is always there, before we are old enough to be aware of it, or whether we ever recognize it. We believe that God’s gracious favor toward us in Christ is unconditional, not contingent on our goodness, our choice, or even our recognition of it. That is truly good news, and it is what our tradition tries to uphold in what might better be called “birth baptism,” without denying the importance of personal faith-choices that we have to make as we mature.

Each year on First Epiphany, we hear the story once again of Jesus’ baptism. The account says that at this event God’s Spirit alighted on Jesus in the form of a dove. We believe that this still happens, and that God’s voice is still heard, saying, “This is my child whom I created. I hereby make my eternal covenant with this unique human creation. My favor rests on her/him. Treat this person as a sacred possession of God.” That is why the baptismal liturgy asks us some very crucial questions: “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” And we all say, “We will with God’s help.”

Our baptismal liturgy is saying that there is no human being who is not sacred before God. It is saying that there is not a time when that person is “lost,” or outside of God’s favor. Therefore, there is not a time when it is too early to baptize them. Perhaps most of all, the Baptismal Covenant is asking us to carry out toward one another this same grace and love that God has for all God’s children: “seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself. Does this encompass even those persons who

are hateful to us, unfair to us, or cause us harm? Does it include those who are degraded or distasteful to us? Look to Jesus' life for the answer.

In Jesus' baptism he was committing his life to God's way—no exceptions, no turning back. We all know the story, and how costly that choice was. Our baptism means the same thing: if we are baptized as infants, then those responsible for us make this covenant for us. Later, as we mature and become responsible for ourselves, we have to make the decision personally: Whom shall we worship? Whom shall we serve? What shall we hold to be of ultimate worth? What shall we do with our lives? Confirmation is one kind of public answer that we make.

Perhaps both views of baptism will always live in tension within the larger Christian community. Both point to bedrock elements in our long and complex journey of faith. The main reason that we remember Jesus' baptism during the Church Year is to remind us of our own—what we have committed ourselves to, what we have signed on for, but far more, what God's unbreakable promises mean to us as we make our way in a world where so many promises are broken. Let us take with us, above all, the awareness that what happened at Jesus' baptism happens at ours: God's Spirit is given to us as the dove of peace and joy, and God's voice speaks the eternal covenant promise: "This is my child, with whom I am in love, and upon whom my favor rests." And thus at our baptism, it seems appropriate that the officiant should say: "You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ's own forever."