

Baptism: The Waters of Baptism

By Philip W. Butin

One of the main reasons for the lively discussion that surrounds the doctrine of baptism among contemporary Presbyterians is the historic Reformed conviction that "the Holy Spirit claims us in the waters of baptism" ("Brief Statement of Faith"). In an age when serious Christian commitment is less and less in step with our society's changing values, it is not easy to understand the precise nature and implications of God's baptismal claim on us. Most of us no longer have any illusions that we live in a "Christian culture." But that doesn't necessarily mean we've embraced a new understanding of what it means to be God's people that is adequate to the new situation in which we find ourselves.

A brief return to our Reformed roots helps clarify what is at stake. Centuries ago John Calvin identified God's baptismal claim on Christians with his stirring words "We are not our own, but the Lord's." The crucial factor in the Christian life, he said, is that "we are consecrated and dedicated to God." This means that "we may think, speak, meditate, or do anything only with a view to [the divine] glory." That is what the Second Helvetic Confession means when it explains that in baptism "the elect are consecrated to God." More recently, that is also what "A New Brief Statement of Faith" means when it begins with the phrase, "In life and in death we belong to God."

We are not our own. We are God's people. We belong to God. As Christians, we are not at the mercy of the torrent of societal values and cultural trends swirling and changing around us. Instead, we are at the mercy of the gracious triune God, who claims us in the clear, cleansing waters of baptism.

Unpacking what it means for us to "belong to God" as American Presbyterians at the turn of the 21st century is a daunting challenge. But now more than ever it is crucial that we recover the historic Reformed connection between baptism and God's claim in our lives as Christian believers. The following points may provide a beginning.

1. God's baptismal claim on us is gracious and unconditional.

Regardless of our divergences on other issues, Presbyterians can certainly agree that baptism is all about grace. If we know anything that is distinctively Presbyterian, we know that God's grace extended to us in Jesus Christ is prior to and calls forth our own response of faith. We know our relationship with God depends primarily on what God has done and only secondarily on what we may or may not do. As Presbyterians practice it, baptism is a powerful sacramental enactment of this truth. And because God's gracious call precedes and evokes the human response of faith, it is normal for Christian parents who are active church members to present their children for baptism as infants or very young children.

The grace God extends to us in baptism is not the kind of "cheap grace" that Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned against. Through faith, grace is certainly free to us, in the sense that it is not earned or merited. But it was not free to God. Its price was the life of God's only Son, Jesus. And on the human level, it costs us our own lives, which now belong unconditionally to God. Baptism acknowledges our intention to live as God's people.

When Presbyterians speak of baptism as a covenant, we emphasize the multiple commitments involved. First and most basic, there is God's commitment to us. Then there are the commitments the community of faith makes to us. Finally, and no less important, are the commitments we make to God, to our children, and to the church. That is why our *Book of Order* echoes Calvin's own two-sided treatment of baptism's gracious character when it says:

Baptism enacts and seals what the Word proclaims: God's redeeming grace offered to all people. Baptism is God's gift of grace and also God's summons to respond to that grace. Baptism calls to repentance, to faithfulness, and to discipleship. Baptism gives the church its identity and commissions the church for ministry to the world.

Many contemporary Presbyterians may be a bit uncomfortable with the thought that God's claim on us in baptism is unconditional. But it all depends on how we define "comfort." The Heidelberg Catechism begins with the question, "What is your only comfort, in life and in death?" The answer: "That I belong--body and soul, in life and in death--not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ . . ." It goes on to recount the wonderful comfort we can gain from the assurance that Christ forgives us, liberates us from evil, protects us, governs circumstances for our salvation, promises us eternal life, and gives us the will and the strength to live for God. Practically speaking, the point is that Christ has stood in our place, fulfilling all the divine conditions for our salvation, wholeness and future hope. Nothing we do or fail to do can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38).



2. God's baptismal claim on us is corporate and communal.

In many areas of American life the unbridled individualism that has long characterized our culture has now been tried and found wanting. However, it still lingers in many of the popular ideas we bring to church. Baptism is no exception.

Many of us still cling to cultural ideas of baptism as a source of grace that is subject to our personal schedules, opinions, demands, tastes and preferences. We may regard baptism as a private right that goes along with being listed on the church roll. We may even find ourselves assuming that in baptism God is at our disposal. With these individualistic assumptions it is difficult to appreciate the Reformed understanding of baptism as a sacred covenant in which we and our children are inseparably united as members to Christ and to the living community of faith by the Holy Spirit.

In contrast, a Biblical understanding of baptism underlines and profoundly reinforces its corporate and communal nature. Chapter 12 of First Corinthians emphasizes that together Christians constitute the Body of Christ and are individually members of it. In this same context the apostle Paul can say, "In the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (12:13). Baptism implies active membership in Christ's Body: the community of faith. The basic meaning of "member" is a part or limb. All this implies that trying to live the Christian life apart from the church is a contradiction in terms.

Baptism calls us to the kind of mutual caring and sharing that characterized the early Christians, and that made others say about them, "See how they love one another!"

3. God's baptismal claim on us is transforming and liberating.

Traditionally Presbyterians have understood the efficacy of the sacrament of baptism to be centered in the transforming power of the Holy Spirit. New Testament baptismal texts like Colossians 2:8-3:17 remind us that baptism initiates a lifelong process of transformation and liberation, both in the community of faith and in the individuals who belong to it. In that process we die to all that is evil in both our common life and our personal lives--as we are raised together to new life in Christ.

There is a troubling tendency in the church today to define liberation in terms that set it over/against personal transformation. Too often freedom is misunderstood as the right to follow some self-defined path to personal fulfillment on the assumption that the transformation of our desires, habits, values or natural tendencies is impossible.

Baptism calls us to hope in God for more. We baptize in the strong name of the Trinity. God is not only our Creator. In Christ, God is also our Redeemer. As the Holy Spirit, God is also our Liberator and Transformer. As Christians, we are not left to resign ourselves to the natural limitations and possibilities of our world, our culture or our individual tendencies.

The triune God who created the world is also actively at work in that world, to redeem and transform it according to the vision of the divine reign.

Through faith in this triune God, baptism calls us all to share in the ministry of transformation and liberation that is the work of the Spirit who lives in our midst. As we embrace this call in this life, we will find ourselves being personally and corporately transformed by the living God as we receive foretastes of that genuine freedom that consists in harmony with God's ultimate purpose for the whole creation.

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