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Who Are "We"? Baptism as a Christian Practice of Trans-national Identity

BETH PHILLIPS

WHAT DOES BAPTISM HAVE TO DO WITH CIVIL RELIGION?

One of the many functions of civil religion is that it offers the diverse peoples of a nation-state one cohesive identity; it tells us who we are. Civil religion in the United States tells us that we are Americans. We know who "we" are when we say, "United We Stand." The identity-forming function of civil religion has some clear positive functions in societies. However, it is at this point—the issue of identity—that the Christian religion poses one of its most serious challenges to civil religion. Jesus Christ asked his followers to take on a new primary identity that relativized all other sources of identity, including family, ethnicity, sex, and nationality. And it is in the practice of baptism that we join all followers of Jesus in taking on this new identity.

The suggestion that baptism has anything to do with civil religion is likely to seem quite odd to many Christians today. In the modern West the practice of baptism has often been reduced to a simple transaction between God and the baptized individual. Many of us have practiced baptism as if the only thing that really changes is that a person who was doomed to hell will now someday go to heaven. But Paul said that when a person puts on Christ, everything changes. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new" (2 Cor 5:17). This newness changes not only the individual; it is meant to change how all those who take on Christ in baptism relate to others. "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view" (2 Cor 5:16a). Empowered to view one another as God does, instead of from a human point of view, we are enabled to challenge the divisions that keep humans estranged from one another. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:27-28). There is no longer American or Iraqi; for we are one with all those baptized into Christ regardless of their nationality. When we put on Christ in baptism, we become citizens of Christ's kingdom, a new nation which transcends all earthly nations and knows no national boundaries.

In other words, when we submit to Christ in baptism, we take on Christ as our primary identifier. Our first and most earnest response to the question, "Who are we?" should be, "We are Christ's." This does not, of course, mean that other identifiers cease to exist. Jesus did not ask his followers to stop being Jews or Gentiles, males or females. Christianity is not a melting pot in which our individual and group identities melt away into one, homogeneous identity. The Christian church is rather more like a body in which parts are unique and distinct and yet cohere to one another and function for one another's good. Regarding civil religion, therefore, becoming a Christian does not mean rejecting the identifier "American." I remain an American and embrace all that is good about America. However, becoming a Christian does mean rejecting my nationality as my primary identity. It means rejecting any claim the nation places on me that conflicts with the lordship of Jesus. And it means that I must refuse to participate in the "us versus them" demonization of non-American groups, because Christ died for all, not for "us."

THE SHIFTING MEANING OF BAPTISM IN THE EARLY CHURCH

In *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom*, Alan Kreider describes how early Christian conversion changed as the relationship between Christianity and the Roman Empire changed.¹ One example is found in Cyprian, a Roman aristocrat who became a Christian near the middle of the third century. As Cyprian was introduced to Christian teachings, it became clear to him that choosing Christianity would mean serious changes in his relationship to wealth, possessions, and imperial power. “These things,” he admitted, “have become deeply and radically engrained within us.” He struggled to believe that he could actually live the Christian life, but he chose nonetheless to submit to baptism. During his baptism, he was overcome with a sense of empowerment by the Holy Spirit. “In a wondrous manner what before had seemed difficult began to suggest a means of accomplishment.” Cyprian sold most of his possessions, began to live simply and hospitably, and became a leader in the church.²

Kreider contrasts Cyprian’s conversion with that of Volusian, another Roman aristocrat who became acquainted with Christianity in the early fifth century. Volusian, like Cyprian, became nervous about the implications of Christian teachings for his life. He was particularly concerned that the teachings of Jesus were contrary to the well-being of the Roman Empire. However, unlike Cyprian, Volusian was apparently not surrounded by a Christian community who upheld the teachings of Jesus as costly, binding, and possible. Instead, Volusian received assurances in letters from Augustine that many Roman aristocrats had become Christians without changing their roles in the Empire and that the difficult teachings of Jesus were not meant to be followed socially but inwardly, in the heart. Augustine apparently wanted to persuade Volusian that his life as a Roman aristocrat need not change, and that Jesus would have nothing to say that would challenge the Empire. Volusian lived the next twenty-four years of his life as an aristocrat and a pagan, and did not submit to Christian baptism until his health began to fail and his entire family had converted. He was apparently sprinkled on his sickbed and died shortly thereafter.³

Cyprian was taught that if he became a Christian, his primary identity would no longer be found in the Empire but in Christ and the Christian community. Volusian was assured that no such change in identity was necessary; he could maintain his imperial identity and add a Christian component alongside. We must ask ourselves whether our current understanding and practice of baptism more closely resembles that of Cyprian—a comprehensive, identity-transforming process of the earlier churches—or that of Volusian, a reduced and simplified transaction that does not challenge or transform our most basic social identity. When sisters and brothers are baptized in our churches, are they aware that they are asking for a comprehensive transformation of their identities and lives? When they declare, “Jesus is Lord,” do they mean Lord of all of life, personal and social, private and public, inward and outward? When “we” talk about ourselves in our churches, are “we” baptized Christians or are “we” Americans?

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

Am I just toying with words here? What difference does it really make what we mean when we say “we”? Actually, it makes a profound difference, for identity determines loyalty, and vice versa. We are loyal to the group with which we most closely identify ourselves and we most closely identify ourselves with the group where we place our loyalty. When that group is the nation-state more than the church, it makes important theological and moral differences. Consider just three of these: first, it makes a difference in how we view God’s relationship to a specific nation. When any nation becomes firmly entrenched in civil religion, one result is usually the belief that God is on “our” side. Whatever “we” want must be what God wants. And whatever God wants, God must want it for and through “us.” In other words, civil religion can become

1. Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1999).

2. Kreider, 7-9.

3. Ibid., 65-70.

idolatry: people cease to honor God as the omnipotent creator and redeemer of all and begin to hold God up as the divine mascot for "us."

Second, identification of God with "our" nation allows the easy demonization of peoples of other nations. If God is for "us," God is obviously against "them." Other nations are seen, at best, as less valuable to God, and at worst, as evil obstructers to God's divine will for "us." Thus a nation can become emboldened to seek the fulfillment of its own agenda regardless of the costs to others. In this way, civil religion can prevent Christians from compassionately identifying with the other, and loving the enemy as Jesus taught.

Third, finding our identity in civil religion can leave us vulnerable to being tossed about by every new wind of the rhetoric of the powerful. Whatever the powers-that-be want to achieve, they need only wrap it in the garb of civil religion to convince us that it is "our" duty or calling, and they quickly find that we are at their disposal. We are less likely to question whether the agenda is just, moral, or humane because it seems so clear that it is what "we" should be doing. Thus civil religion becomes a question of lordship. Is Jesus lord, or do we often surrender lordship to the powers-that-be?

Have these dynamics of civil religion taken hold in your church? One of the surest ways to tell whether civil religion is more identity-forming than baptism is to consider how your church has responded to recent and current wars. My question here is not whether you believe that these wars were justifiable, or whether war is ever justifiable—that is an important question for other conversations, but not our focus here. Instead, my question is this: in wartime, what does your church's public rhetoric indicate about its primary identity and loyalty? For example, when your church prays about war, do you pray for "our" troops and "our" success? Do you speak in ways that assume that the war is being fought for "our" benefit, to defend "our" freedom? When we allow civil religion to form our primary identity, we identify ourselves as Americans in relation to current conflicts, we believe that the conflict is "us" against "them," and we rejoice at "our" success in battle. By contrast, when we allow Jesus to determine our primary identity, we can no longer view wars in terms of "us" against "them" because "we" are Christians and there are Christians and potential Christians in every nation where America wages war. People dying in Iraq are not "them," they are part of "us." Even if you believe that a war is just, war is always tragic and there should be no element of joy in the deaths of thousands of people. This is no small matter. Jesus thought those people valuable enough to die for them; if we rejoice in their deaths as if they were "our" victories, we deny Jesus.

A CALL TO INTENTIONALITY

What can we do in our churches to counter this potential pitfall? First, we need to become intentionally reflective concerning the influence of civil religion in our churches. A good way to begin such reflection would be to ask a few questions of any practices in our churches that relate to the nation and/or the government: Does this practice serve to lift up the way of Jesus or the interests of the nation-state? Does this practice function to identify us more closely with God in Christ or to identify God more closely with a particular nation? Does this practice proclaim the lordship of Jesus or does it surrender lordship to the powers-that-be?

In addition, we need to renew our theology and practice of baptism. One of the most wonderful things about the Stone-Campbell movement is our clear conviction that adult baptism is essential. However, in our insistence upon the practice of baptism, we have focused almost exclusively on when, why, and how it should be done. We are in deep need of more intentional reflection upon what baptism is, what it means, and what it does. In a time when some Stone-Campbellites seem embarrassed about the centrality of baptism in our tradition, I would counter that we have not placed too much emphasis on baptism, rather we have sometimes placed the wrong kind of emphasis on baptism. We have sometimes placed so much emphasis on certain aspects of baptism that we have neglected other important aspects. However, the appropriate response to such a realization is not to back away from baptism but to delve more deeply into those aspects and meanings of baptism which we have neglected. To be more specific, surely the embarrassment of many in Churches of Christ arises from the exclusivist and divisive ways in which some have propounded the doc-

trine of baptism. But marginalizing the practice will not remedy this embarrassing feature of our past. What can remedy exclusivist and divisive doctrines of baptism is a deeper understanding of all the biblical dimensions of the practice, central among which is reconciliation and the overcoming of divisions through entering a new society which identifies itself with and gives its loyalty to Jesus Christ alone.

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