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“Come Now, As We Stand . . .”: Baptism in Faith, Life, and Sunday Worship

DAVID LEMLEY

Baptism long grounded worship for Stone-Campbell churches in the Christian tradition, in the very witness of scripture, regarding what it means to be Christian. The “invitation song” symbolized our historic emphasis on the personal call of Jesus to each life, and new birth into an ecclesial family. Baptism was, arguably, the implicit climax of the model of Christian worship at our roots. Worship on the nineteenth-century American frontier¹ was driven by an evangelistic urgency, and an ideal worship service prepared hearts for the word in song, drew souls to conviction in sermon, and invited the assembly to baptism in view of the gospel. Baptism was the intended result of all that came prior in this inherited flow, specifically to the invitation offered after the word was proclaimed.

In the last several decades, as Churches of Christ became more interested in our own history, we sometimes despaired of our “patternism” and its reduction of the restoration vision to restoring biblically-warranted Sunday worship practices. Although falling outside our normative “five acts of worship,” baptism was certainly treated as a ritual that required heartfelt participation in biblically-precedented action. Our usual pattern—the public profession that Jesus is Lord and a Trinitarian formula applied to immersion “for the remission of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit”—functioned like many of our best traditions: as an ark of fruitful orthodoxy regardless of our full, conscious, active participation (or nonparticipation) in the meanings of those actions.

To some extent, even when lacking the theological language to describe what was witnessed, the practice of baptism marked a transformed reality for everyone gathered. Mother and daughter became sisters in Christ; members and visitors became co-laborers in the gospel; neighbors and strangers became family.

That expectancy of transformation is in our ecclesial DNA, and many of our best theologians and historians have renewed our imagination about what that can mean.² Such contributions often provide thoughtful proposals for how congregations might better rehearse a more robust baptismal theology, letting theology rightly shape practice. These proposals expand not only our repertoire of ritual acts, but enrich intentionality in preparing and equipping individuals for their new life with Christ and his bride. Many congregations took these innovations to heart, adding curriculum, events, and participatory elements to baptism to deepen the congregation’s engagement as well as the recipient’s.

1. Worship scholar James White identifies Stone-Campbell churches within the “Frontier Tradition,” emphasizing preaching for conversion, influenced by the great American revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He notes that frontier baptisms were more strongly tied to sacramental festivals or revival meetings, distinct from the local churches of which converts became members. Thus, baptism was not typically viewed as part of corporate worship of the local church. However, conversion (or mission) as a key factor in the impulse of Frontier worship, contributes to the regularity of the invitation or invitation song. See James White, *Protestant Worship: Traditions in Transition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989).

2. One of the most influential examples renewing imagination among Churches of Christ is John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor’s *Down in the River to Pray* (Siloam Springs: Leafwood, 2004). Hicks also recently revisited baptism in *Enter the Water, Come to the Table* (Abilene: ACU Press, 2014).

Our theology of baptism, our “here is water” immediacy, offers an urgency that does not always wait for the full community at a designated time. As the post-sermon invitation, or “invitation song,” becomes less frequent or recedes altogether from churches’ assemblies, the suggestion that the corporate assembly is the normative time and place to witness to our baptismal identity also declines. For church members, this not only reduces the likelihood of participating in a baptism, but the likelihood that the congregation would overtly recognize its own baptismal identity week in and week out.

Perhaps our better angels are responsible for the decline in offering an invitation. As evangelistic emphases shifted from moment-of-conversion to initiation-to-discipleship, we developed ways to emphasize the latter in our corporate assemblies. Whatever the cause, the result is the loss of our primary act of corporate worship explicitly affirming our identity and mission as God’s baptized people. When the invitation goes missing, so does the opportunity to discern among us our shared identity as a people joined in the water or to bring to mind others with whom we hope to share kingdom life. While any number of sermons may address this topically, we no longer rehearse this reality liturgically.

A conscious affirmation in our worship assemblies that we are a gathering of the baptized, joined in the Spirit for the mission of God as a congregation, provides a needed rehearsal of our missional identity. Considering what that might look like—beyond simply reinstating the invitation—there is hardly an element of our worship that could not be framed by our baptismal identity. In strengthening ritual practice in light of theological growth regarding baptism, churches may consider how worship might affirm the distinction of the baptized life. In bringing congruence between our theology of baptism into God’s vast new creation and our particular Sunday gathering of the baptized, we empower members to grasp that once-received gift in every affirmation of Christian identity and continued progress in Christian maturity.

Connecting Life, Faith, and Worship

A fifth-century colleague of Augustine, Prosper of Aquitaine, suggested in the midst of doctrinal debates that the church’s words and actions in worship might themselves dictate the content of the church’s faith. Christians had best attend to whether what we do and speak and sing in ritual properly rehearses what we confess as truth. Many church leaders and theologians since took up Prosper’s dictum, “the law of praying is the law of believing,” and considered the reciprocal relationship between congregational worship and Christian doctrine. The typical Christian is likely to describe what they believe in terms of what they profess and rehearse on the Lord’s Day.

Corporate worship must also connect us to what it means to live daily lives of worship (Rom 12.1). Acceptable worship has to do with conforming the pattern of our lives to the realities our rituals claim. For example, Isaiah tells God’s people that right praise and sacrifice cannot mask the practices of injustice separating them from one another (Isa 58.1–9). Similarly, Jesus teaches that God’s people must be reconciled before coming to the religious activities that mark their confession of faith (Matt 5.23–34). Throughout scripture, the pattern of worship is inextricably tied to the pattern of our relationships to one another. As we sing songs of mutual encouragement, share words of exhortation, or break bread in the manner of Jesus, the symbols of our worship not only correspond to our theological convictions but also rehearse our Christian life.

Christian worship as participation in God’s self-communication³ requires recognition that what we rehearse ritually is a profession in word and deed about who God is and the nature of life in God’s kingdom. We are gathered in word, table, and song so that we might be sent out in faithful Christian identity and mission. How we practice baptism testifies to what we believe about the Christian life.

Many churches have reflected a more robust vision of baptism by adding congregational responses to baptism that take place in the assembly, from celebratory applause to a welcome circle.⁴ Others have

3. A definition employed by Edward Kilmartin in *Christian Liturgy: Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1988).

4. The welcome circle is described by David K. Lewis, Carley H. Dodd, and Darryl L. Tippens in *The Gospel According to Generation X* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1995). Hicks and Taylor offer the welcome circle among several helpful, practical suggestions for churches to “recapture baptism as a richly symbolic and communal moment of transformation” in *Down in the River to Pray*, 219–233.

developed 101-type curricula for new members,⁵ or adapted effective evangelistic programs like the Alpha Course⁶ for people new to faith. These efforts affirm a theological commitment to baptism falling within the process of Christian initiation, the beginning of a journey through Christ, in the Spirit, to the Father, joining others in God's mission for the world.

As it was practiced in the fourth and fifth centuries, programs of faith formation—catechesis—were meant not only to form the new believer in their Christian identity but to restore returning believers and affirm the continued formation of every participant.⁷ The catechism affirmed the entry of a new Christian into the family of God by calling the congregation to act out their role as family members.⁸ In so doing, every part of the church rehearsed their Christian identity through the process of one person becoming Christian. This concept of the whole body playing a part enacts a larger view of baptism as transformative, relational, and missional.

Baptism is an opportunity for churches to affirm the place of each gifted individual in the ministry of the body. It is an opportunity to recognize those mothers and fathers in the faith whose model, guidance, and accompaniment has shaped others. It is also an invitation to many with an unclear relationship to the church and to Jesus, whether by virtue of being new to the community or being so familiar as to feel “inoculated” to conviction or wonder. When we celebrate a baptism, churches may give participatory roles to the uninitiated, even uninterested, as well as to the mature among them. As in planning any act of worship, we can develop baptismal practices that bring our experience of time, place, language, and action into congruence with our theological conviction and intention for lived faithfulness.

Mark the time together

An emphasis on the urgency of baptism creates discomfort with the idea of a “baptism Sunday.” However, wise churches typically watch for how different dates in the calendar call for different emphases in worship. When churches recognize the rhythm of outreach and formation in their context, there are opportunities to set themes of spiritual planting and harvest for every member of the church. Whether the surge of visitors around Christmas and Easter or the surge of enthusiasm that comes with a summer youth program, there are natural moments to bring recurring attention to the importance of baptism for a congregation. While the community need not be encouraged to wait for a certain date to be baptized, a baptism Sunday can celebrate new baptisms from the previous year (or quarter), and offer an opportunity for the whole congregation to recall and affirm their own baptism through testimony in story, song, or other media.

Particularly in an age when any moment might be digitally documented, sharing an image or clip of a baptism can bring the moment to the congregation. A testimony or interview (perhaps recorded, if an individual is nervous to be on stage) can give voice to the stories of both new and seasoned Christians, as they reflect on how their baptism continues to shape their Christian identity. A commissioning prayer can tie this affirmation of baptism to the church's call to ministry.

5. Saddleback Church of Lake Forest, CA, developed and distributed the 101 series as “Christian Life and Service Seminars.” Saddleback Church's website, accessed July 12, 2014, <http://saddleback.com/connect/ministry/class>.

6. The Alpha Course is an evangelistic curriculum that follows a pattern of faith development not unlike catechetical instruction. Alpha Course website, accessed July 12, 2014, <http://guest.alphausa.org>.

7. William Harmless in *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995) describes how Augustine, as a fifth-century pastor, structured faith development in worship and preaching with his congregation through conflicts over lapsed members or immature believers.

8. A renewed interest in the fourth-century heyday of catechetical formation influenced programs such as the Alpha Course and the Roman Catholic Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. Robert Webber's *Ancient-Future* series, particularly *Ancient-Future Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), lays out a program of conversion and formation based on early catechetical models that include baptism. Also see Tommy King's “Can We Say, ‘Catechesis?’” in *Leaven* archives, accessed July 14, 2014, <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol14/iss3/10>.

Choosing a date that marks baptism in a special way allows a church to trace together the process of formation that baptism initiates.⁹ A congregational curriculum leading up to that date might bring the whole church to a new or deeper awareness of what baptism means in their community. The commitment to this as a regular part of the church calendar indicates the importance of baptism to this community.

Develop Ritual Actions Worthy of Baptism

Scripture affirms baptism as acting out the key mystery of our faith: Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. This rehearsal of the Christian faith can represent the communal reality of our Christian life as we find ways for the whole congregation to become active participants in the baptism of each individual.

Baptisms that occur outside church facilities or in spaces that accommodate gathering near the water offer the congregation a unique opportunity for physical participation. Some ministers ask witnesses to put their hands into the baptismal waters, remembering their own baptism and experiencing their unity in baptism through touching the water together.

The meaning of every action is bound up in the actor as well. Giving appropriate roles to people all along the spectrum of faith affirms both the importance of baptism to life of every member, and the importance of every member to the life of the church. Churches can give the newly initiated roles in public worship. Services can regularly include testimony by people all along the journey to faith, enacting the church's loving confidence in receiving skeptics, the church's care-filled attention to its more vulnerable young Christians, as well as the church's real stories of times baptismal covenant held members to God through unexpected challenges. As we emphasize mentoring, we must also make opportunities to identify mature guides among the congregation that may be called on by those who need them.

Recognizing the Story Our Worship Space Tells

Baptisteries are often set high and away from the gathering, to facilitate a better view of the event, and they are easily covered when not in use. This is an efficient use of space, but an unfortunate theological statement.

Some witnesses only have the experience of seeing the distant, unfamiliar faces of those participating in baptism, peering over the baptistery's edge. Multimedia (and resources related to our online spaces) can surely offer the congregation an up-close view of the face and life of a new brother or sister as well.

How does the worship space accommodate gathering the church to accompany and receive the newly baptized member? Some baptisms enact a lonely walk of an individual down a narrow aisle, arriving in the daunting spotlight of a bare stage. Making room to accommodate physical accompaniment to the water by those who have spiritually led a person there as well as the reception and commissioning of a new believer by their new family are important theological statements our worship spaces can facilitate.

In many physical spaces, response to the invitation visually represents movement toward the water (perhaps meeting the word along the way), but what flows from the baptistery to the congregation? It is possible to create symbolic action and gesture reminding the church that life in Christ and our ministry together flows from this font. Moments in worship can make an association between the ministries, service, and leadership of the church and the place where we were raised to new life. Perhaps times of pastoral care and restoration following services could be visibly tied to the same place where we received our commission to be reconcilers.

Language of Worship

Some churches include a spoken congregational response following the public confession of faith or the baptism itself. This gives a congregation a role in the act of baptism, so that both the baptized individual and the community see this act as a sign of their relationship. For example:

⁹ The period of Lent, the forty days before Easter, was used by early catechumenists for the purpose of marking formation and conversion of catechumens alongside the rest of the congregation.

“Church, do you join Renee’s confession with your own: Is Jesus the Son of God and Lord of our lives?”

“Do you, church family, commit to honor Renee’s birth into the body of Christ? Do you commit to building her up in her faith and her gifts, as the Spirit brings all of us to effective roles in God’s mission at First Avenue?”

The congregation might respond, “Amen” or “We do.” Some congregations ask members to stand, extend hands in blessing, or bodily surround a new member of the community during a consecrating or commissioning prayer.

Personal testimony is more frequently related to baptism in contemporary practice, often expanding on the standard confession of faith to include a description by the baptizer of how they have witnessed the growth of the individual being baptized. This is a good way to note the way that baptism is a part of the process of faith formation, and may introduce the congregation to an unfamiliar new member. Testimony can be intentionally shaped in a way that fosters a clear view of the process of coming to Christian maturity. The person performing baptism might recount their own conversion, describing explicitly the faith they have received and subsequently pass on in baptism. The language of testimony can also remind the congregation that baptism tells the story not of what we are doing, but of what God is doing. The person receiving baptism may be encouraged, as a part of his own initiation, to recount evidence of God’s work in his life to bring him to this point, and may recount this to the congregation.

Worship leaders can also allow the language and symbolism of baptism to infuse the ordinary practices of worship. A quick “And all God’s people said . . .” can bring the church to remember who and where they are in responding “Amen.” In the same way, a reference to baptism in our call to worship, at the table, in the word, or framing the benediction can remind us that we are gathered as the baptized. The language of baptism in relationship to approaching the table or responding to the word can regularly remind those belonging to the church of where they stand in relationship to God, having already passed through the water. We are born of water and spirit into new lives, new purpose, new relationships, and it is because of this that we have been called to worship, called to faithfulness, and called to love.

Finally, perhaps we are too quick to ditch the invitation. While we find ourselves with a healthier theology of conversion than indicated by some invitation practices of the past, baptism is a key point in recognizing the claim of God’s word on the church. *Benediction* connotes not only a blessing upon the congregation, but also signifies sending the congregation as a baptized people, into the mission that water enacts and spirit empowers. When offered, the invitation into the water is a theologically rich and congregationally unifying opportunity.

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