

## Wade in the Water: Baptismal Narratives and the Formation of Identity and Discipleship

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Abstract: The centrality of baptism in the Christian story is more clearly delineated when its theological nuances are debated. Working from a Reformed interpretation, baptism is both a ritual of community and a rite of commissioning signifying the dual claim of baptism on the person and the congregation. In baptism the ritual of the community of faith is that it affirms the self-giving act of God in Jesus Christ as we are called to participate in his life, death and resurrection. In water and in Word our identity is sealed, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as we are marked as Christ's own and claimed as children of God - children of the covenant of grace. It is a sign that we are engrafted into this community and the covenant is made. In baptism the rite of the commissioning becomes the sign of God's election and the seal of the Holy Spirit into that election to a life of service. Baptism is a covenantal act that draws us into the community and at the same time a covenantal act that sends us out into the world to live and work as disciples who make God's transformational love manifest. This dual claim of the covenant of baptism, community and commissioning, is essential to understanding how and why God's people are to live together in faithfulness both in personal and public ways. This paper will examine the role of baptismal narratives and their power to shape identity. It will show that baptismal stories can provide opportunities for meaning making.

What is the role of baptism in a disciple-making church? This was the question that guided the theological conversation among six clergy called to serve and lead a four thousand member reformed congregation. What meaning does it have for those who would bring their children for baptism, the children who are growing into their baptism and those who gather to represent the church universal? These are the questions that ignited the phenomenological research of the past ten months.

Debate about the meaning, role and function of the sacraments in the life of the church is a long standing one that found particular expression in the writings of the sixteenth century reformers.<sup>1</sup> Covenant played a primary role in Zwingli, Luther, Bucer, Bullinger and Calvin's sacramental theology in general and their baptismal theology in particular.<sup>2</sup> Brian Gerrish aids in narrowing the field for consideration by placing Zwingli, Bullinger and Calvin's positions on a continuum that examines their distinctive contributions.<sup>3</sup> Though his work references their views of the Lord's Supper the classification is also helpful in understanding their positions on baptism.

Gerrish describes Zwingli's sacramental views as symbolic memorialism. The sacrament references a previous occasion of grace. Zwingli views baptism as a human act of covenant that points to and reminds us of God's covenant. It is a sign of our promise of faithfulness to God and reflects our membership in God's family.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a further reading see Riggs, John W. *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: An Historical and Practical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) and Holifield, E. Brooks. *The Covenant Sealed: The Development of Puritan Sacramental Theology in Old and New England, 1570-1720* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1974.

<sup>2</sup> Riggs, John W. *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: An Historical and Practical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2002, 21- 70.

<sup>3</sup> Gerrish, Brian. "The Lord's Supper in Reformed Confessions," in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*. ed. Donald K. McKim, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 245-258.

<sup>4</sup> Riggs, 21-25.

Bullinger's view is described as symbolic parallelism. The internal occurrence of grace collocates with the external sign. He moves away from Zwingli's view of the sacrament as a memorial to something that has already occurred but not as far as Calvin's instrumental view. In the Second Helvetic Confession Bullinger writes that in baptism we are "inwardly regenerated, purified and renewed by God; and outwardly we receive the assurance of the greatest gifts in the water, by which also those great benefits are represented, and, as it were, set before our eyes to be beheld."<sup>5</sup>

John Calvin's views, in Gerrish's terminology, are represented by symbolic instrumentalism. There is an active and dynamic presence in the sacraments that confers and confirms that of which they are a sign. It is this position on the sacraments that will ground the work of this dissertation. For Calvin, the sacraments are set within the larger understanding of the electing love of a God who acts first with a freely given promise of the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. It is a promise that is expressed in the covenant of grace – one that humans cannot earn, but they live within its benevolent embrace and live out its call to a life of service in grateful response. The sacraments are intrinsically connected to this preceding promise and, according to the reformed tradition, are a visible sign of an invisible grace. They are both a sign and seal of God's initiative act of benevolence towards us in Word of God incarnate, Jesus Christ, and are inextricably linked to the prior pledge of the Sovereign God. They are the sign of what has already happened in the definitive witness of Jesus Christ. The sacraments are also a seal, a dynamic and immediate act of God through the Holy Spirit, binding us to the community, confirming faith and sustaining our life of faith. These sacred acts are central to encountering the living God in worship, as they are wedded to Word of God written and proclaimed; calling us into a real and relevant relationship that transforms life. The sacraments are both covenant affirming and covenant making. They witness to the covenant of grace embodied and enacted in Jesus Christ and they are a means by which the church universal enters into a covenantal way of living. The dynamic of the Holy Spirit working in the sacraments make them more than mere memorials and dedications but rather enlivens them as instruments of God as they ontologically and instrumentally shape the identity of community of believers both corporately and personally.<sup>6</sup>

John Calvin grounds his theology of the sacraments as a means of grace in the doctrine of covenant and the promise given to Abraham and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.<sup>7</sup> He believes that baptism is a sign of God's absolute love for those whom God has adopted as children, heirs of the promise of grace. Before we could reach out to God or do anything to earn the benevolent gift of justification, God acted first calling us into a life of community and service.

Baptism is both a ritual of community and a rite of commissioning<sup>8</sup> signifying the dual claim of baptism on the person and the congregation. In baptism the ritual of the community of faith is that it affirms the self-giving act of God in Jesus Christ as we are called to participate in

<sup>5</sup> Presbyterian Church, (USA). "The Second Helvetic Confession, Chapter 20" *The Book of Confessions: The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, (USA), Part I* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly), 2002.

<sup>6</sup> The baptismal theology summarized and expressed in this paper is drawn from the work of John Calvin, the Presbyterian Church (USA) Office of Theology and Worship, Brian Gerrish, Aidan Kavanagh, Lewis Schenck, Laurence Stookey and James White.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion* Edited by John. T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1297-1298. See also Calvin's discussion of infant baptism's relationship to the covenant made with Abraham in Holifield, 16-17.

<sup>8</sup> By ritual I mean a ceremonial act of the community of faith that embodies and points to a greater theological understanding. By rite I mean a liturgical formulation of a significant passage in the life of faith.

his life, death and resurrection. In water and in Word our identity is sealed, by the power of the Holy Spirit, as we are marked as Christ's own and claimed as children of God - children of the covenant of grace. It is a sign that we are engrafted into this community, much as a sapling is cut and bound to the adult tree as it draws nourishment and strength for life, and the covenant is made. In baptism the rite of the commissioning becomes the sign of God's election and the seal of the Holy Spirit into that election to a life of service. Baptism is a covenantal act that draws us into the community and at the same time a covenantal act that sends us out into the world to live and work as disciples who make God's transformational love manifest.

This dual claim of the covenant of baptism, community and commissioning, is essential to understanding how and why God's people are to live together in faithfulness both in personal and public ways. Here, the work of Ernst Troeltsch offers additional assistance in clarifying the understanding of baptism followed in this dissertation. Troeltsch categorized the relationship between religious communities and the world in three sociological types: church, sect and mysticism.<sup>9</sup>

The Church type focuses on the divinely imbued theological truths such as means of grace, the purpose and work of redemption and their relationship between the institution and the world. It works within the world but holds these theological "truths" as the higher ethical standard.<sup>10</sup>

The Sect type calls for the faithful to remove themselves from the world and to strictly adhere to the Gospel's law as its standard for its codes of conduct. It is an intentional community whose social order anticipates the reign of God.<sup>11</sup>

The Mystic type promotes an internal and far more individualistic approach to faith and life. The religious experience is an inward journey aided by worship, liturgy and emotion.<sup>12</sup>

Troeltsch presents Calvinism as a curious blend that both defies and unites all three types.<sup>13</sup> This is clearly seen when examining Calvin's understanding of baptism and its subsequent interpretations within theology and practice. Baptism as a means of grace shades towards Gerrish's symbolic parallelism and Troeltsch's church-type both indicating God's dynamic action presently at work. The creation of Reformation Geneva and later the Puritan movement<sup>14</sup> shows Calvin's theology as the foundation for intentional community as seen in Troeltsch's sect-type both of which exhibit characteristics of baptism's call to a new standard of living. The mystic-type even manifests itself in subtle ways within Calvin's understanding of faith<sup>15</sup> and baptism as a personal experience with the Sovereign God sealed by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>9</sup> Troeltsch, Ernst, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, Volumes I and II* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 461-465.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 730-731.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 520-627.

<sup>14</sup> Hall, David D. *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 154-157. See his discussion of the Puritans tribalism approach to baptism in particular his recounting of Jonathan Edward's anger with his congregants for devaluing the sacrament and its preceding covenant into mere ceremony rather than taking seriously its claim on faith and life.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin, Book III, Chapter 2. Calvin's definition of faith, "Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise of Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit," exhibits Gerrish's instrumentalism and Troeltsch's personalization expressed in the mystic-type while grounding it in the doctrines of the church-type.

Yet he does not allow the personal to dominate or play center stage. It is this amalgamation of Troeltsch's sociological types embodied in Calvin that informs my work.

The practice, and even centrality, of infant baptism can cause consternation to those who would emphasize one type over the other. This is particularly true with those who seek intentional community that necessitates a cognizant and deliberate decision to abide by the ethical codes set forth in the Gospel standards. I believe that a reorientation of church and civic life, based on the covenant of baptism, as understood from Calvin's type-transcending theology, will lead to transformative faithfulness in personal and public discipleship. Intentional community that holds the standards set forth from and lived out in and through the means of grace church-type can become the vehicle for renewed commitment to an ethical community based on baptismal vows and theology.

The radical nature of baptism seems lost within the church today. The transforming claim of this sacrament on the lives all those who participate, parents, child and congregation, appear to be lost in pageantry of baptismal gowns, anxiety over the behavior of the child and plans for the soiree after the service. The historic overview aids in theological understanding and is necessary for finding one's place in tradition. But it is the phenomenological questions that emerged from the conversation of those six clergy that seek to recover the sacrament's core place in the life of the community of faith and the disciples and moves us to the questions of meaning.

Over the past ten months parents desiring their children to be baptized have been required by the governing body of the church to attend a two hour class on the meaning of baptism. Three groups of people were engaged in conversation about their understanding of the meaning of baptism: members of the congregation, children and parents.

### *Congregation*

This congregation is uniquely situated within mainline Protestantism. It is growing and it is young. Though it is traditional in worship and educational style, its largest demographic, both in new and established membership is between the ages of twenty-five and forty-nine. Its members are affluent, highly educated, and predominately Caucasian with a large population of professional women who have chosen to place their careers on hold while they raise children. Theologically it enjoys a full range of perspectives from progressive to conservative. Baptisms occur at least twice a month in any of the three worship service. On average one hundred infants are baptized adding to the eight hundred children ranging in age from birth to eleven years old.

In casual conversations during fellowship suppers, adult education classes and social encounters seventy-six adults in the congregation were asked their views on the meaning and purpose of baptism. The predominate number of respondents expressed their delight each time they saw a baptism listed in the bulletin. The conversation centered on how the babies looked and if they cried. Only twenty percent were able to articulate that baptism is an engraftment into the community of faith, a sign of the remission of sins or a sharing in the life death and resurrection of Christ. Twenty-five percent of respondents expressed that the communal vow in baptism meant they promised to provide Sunday school for children and pray for them if they were ill. Unanimously the language used in describing the communal baptism experience was that of the congregation as spectator. There was no indication that they were participants in each baptism. Participation in baptism was assigned to the ministers, the child and the parents. The closest any one came to describing a level of participation in the sacramental covenant was one woman who said, "When I watch all those darling baptisms, I remember my daughter's baptism." The question of the meaning was also ascribed to the "other" – baptism had meaning

for the parents but very little was articulated about the meaning baptism had in their own lives and the in the life of the congregation.

### *Children*

Questions about baptism were included in the faith interviews of eighty-two children from a congregation that practices infant baptism. After a series of inquires as to their thoughts about God, Jesus, the Bible, Church and Sunday school they were asked:

1. Do you remember your baptism and what do you remember about it?
2. What have you been told about your baptism?
3. Why do we do baptisms and what do you think it's all about?

Ninety-six percent of children indicated that they did not remember their baptism. One six year old child did convey he remembered his baptism.

<i>Interviewer (I)</i>	<i>Do you remember your baptism?</i>
<i>Adam (A)</i>	<i>Yes.</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>How old were you?</i>
<i>A</i>	<i>I was this many years old (Using his fingers he made the sign for zero.)</i>
<i>I</i>	<i>What do you remember about your baptism?</i>
<i>A</i>	<i>Well, I fussed only a little, but when I closed my eyes, they put water on my head while the people watched and I smiled.</i>

Sixty- two percent of children indicated that they did not know what baptism meant. The remaining thirty-eight percent responded with a variety of answers.

<i>Child B</i>	<i>It's when you become a member of the church. (Age 11)</i>
<i>Child C</i>	<i>It's when God talks to baby through the water. (Age 9)</i>
<i>Child D</i>	<i>It's when you wash your hair. (Age 5)</i>
<i>Child E</i>	<i>It's when God promises to protect you. (Age 11)</i>
<i>Child F</i>	<i>It's when the congregation welcomes you. (Age 9)</i>
<i>Child G</i>	<i>It's when babies get water on their hair and they cry. (Age 5)</i>
<i>Child F</i>	<i>It's the time when everybody watches you and smiles. (Age 6)</i>

The majority of responses from the children who expressed an understanding of baptism related it to a sense of welcome. Of the thirty-eight percent of the children who expressed a response to the meaning of baptism ninety-one percent also indicated that their parents told them stories of their own baptism.

### *Parents*

The baptism class for parents begins each session with each person introducing themselves and an invitation to tell the story of their baptism. If they do not know the story of their baptism they can tell the story of another baptism that was particularly meaningful. One hundred and sixty-seven parents have been given this opportunity. Eighty-three percent of the participants did not know anything about their own baptism except the denominational affiliation of their own parents and their own approximate age at that time. Of that eighty-three percent who had older children, one hundred percent told the story of their first child's baptism and how moved they were by the experience. When asked to articulate what was moving about it ninety-two percent were unable to articulate meaning beyond that it was special.

One notable exception was Ann who told the story of her second child's baptism in the neo-natal intensive care unit surrounded by the nurse, doctors and chaplains in a city three states away from their community of faith. There was fear that her child would die before she was baptized. The theology of baptism her own reformed tradition did not warrant such fear but she said, "I wanted my child to be surrounded the church who loved him even at that moment in that city far away." Though the pastor of her congregation could not be present at the baptism he arranged for congregational friends and members to intentionally be in prayer during the time of the baptism. Ann closed her story by saying, "Every time I think about John and find myself sad because of his loss I remember his baptism that evening I see him held in the arms of the congregation and God. I'm looking forward to Ellen's baptism (her two month old daughter) when I can see all the members of this congregation as they promise to hold her that day."

The eight percent who were able to tell the story of their baptism unconsciously spoke about the place their baptism story holds in their family tradition. David spoke about his baptism in the Congo while his parents were missionaries. Evan shared that he was raised Southern Baptist and was an adolescent when he was baptized and remembered the feeling of pier pressure to go forward and recommit his life. This experience led to his hesitancy to become a part of the church later in life and his parent's reminding him throughout his young adult years that if his baptism meant anything to him he should be in church.

After the portion of the class when the story of Jesus' baptism was studied many of those who could not articulate meaning earlier were able to identify a sense of belonging and the presence of the Spirit as factors in their feelings. The language of faith learned through the telling of stories appeared to contribute to the hesitancy to ascribe meaning to experience. The remaining portion of the class was spent in an interactive study of the theological meaning of baptism, exploring an understanding of the covenant that is made in the sacrament and examining the vows the parents and the congregation would take. Particular attention was given to the sense of identity in baptism, the claim of the covenant promises for their child and the implications for discipleship from the vows on the lives of the family. Each class is closed with the encouragement to parents to tell their child the story of their baptism as he or she grows. The suggestion is made to intentionally celebrate and remember their child's baptism on the anniversary of it each year.

In follow-up conversations ninety-four percent of parents with older children expressed a significant difference in the experience of their child's baptism. They were able to articulate meaning using affiliated faith language learned in class. Each person spoke specifically about an added awareness of what the vows they were taking and the congregation's promise and an eagerness to incorporate the baptism narrative into their family's story.

### *Conclusions*

Baptismal narratives have the power to shape meaning in our lives of faith. John Westerhoff wrote,

*Our greatest human need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives. An understanding of the meaning of life is not suddenly acquired at a particular age. At every point in our lives, we seek and need to discover meaning. The whole process begins at childhood when we learn through stories. For a story to hold our attention, it must entertain and arouse our curiosity, but*

*to enrich our lives it must stimulate our imaginations and provide us with even new and deeper meanings*<sup>16</sup>.

The story of our baptism can remind us of who we are and who we are called to be in a world of conflicting messages. In February 1998 Patrick Miller, Old Testament scholar and professor from Princeton Theological Seminary, led a congregational series on the Psalms at Pine Shores Presbyterian Church in Sarasota, FL. Through an exposition of certain Psalms of lament he made the connection between memory, story, and hope. In short he said that without memory of the steadfast love and faithfulness of God throughout the lives of God's own people there is no hope beyond the current circumstances of our lives. And yet, without stories of God's mighty acts of presence and salvation then there is no memory. Stories provide us with identity and meaning. Through the sacred stories of our faith we come to know who we are and what we value. Barbara Myers states the relationship between story and spirituality decisively, *Storytelling is one way caring adults begin to share the meaning of being human with young children. Story is also one way we can talk about spirituality. The stories we honor and prize call our children into being. Stories reorder, sift through our experiences, allows others, young children and adults alike, to hear what we think truly matters. Story connects us with that which lies beyond ourselves and this process makes us ask questions about the meaning of our lives.*<sup>17</sup>

The tale is told of Martin Luther's ritual of placing his hand on his head and remembering his baptism throughout the tempestuousness of his life of faithfulness. Rehearsing the story of our own, and our children's, baptism can provide clarity of identity, meaning in living and purpose in discipleship as we wade into the waters of life.

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<sup>16</sup> Westerhoff, John. *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith*. (New York: Winston Press), 1980, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Myers, Barbara. *Young Children and Spirituality*. (New York: Routledge), 1997, 18.