

Adult Small Group Reading for the Week of January 12, 2020

Pages 279-288 from *Faith Seeking Understanding – An Introduction to Christian Theology* by Daniel L. Migliore

Theme - The Doctrine of Baptism

What Are Sacraments?

While proclamation of the Word of God is an indispensable means of grace, it does not exhaust the many different ways in which the extravagant love of God is communicated to us. In addition to proclamation, there are sacraments. Sacraments are “visible words,”⁵²⁹ embodiments of grace, enacted testimonies to the love of God in Jesus Christ.

An often-repeated definition of sacraments was formulated by Augustine, who called them “visible signs of an invisible grace.” The definition offered by the Westminster Shorter Catechism is more specific: A sacrament is “a holy ordinance instituted by Christ wherein by visible signs Christ and the benefits of the new covenant are represented, sealed, and applied to believers.”⁵³⁰ Sacraments are palpable enactments of the gospel by means of which the Spirit of God confirms to us the forgiving, renewing, and promising love of God in Jesus Christ and enlivens us in faith, hope, and love. The presence of Christ in the proclamation of the Word and the presence of Christ in the practice of the sacraments are not two different Christs but the same Christ present in different ways.

The Bible does not provide a definition of a sacrament, nor does it specify their number. In the New Testament, the Greek word *mysterion* — literally “mystery,” later translated in the Latin as *sacramentum*, or “sacrament” — refers to the presence and purpose of God made known in Jesus Christ, not specifically to baptism, the Lord’s Supper, or other rites (Eph. 1:9-10). In the early Middle Ages, the number of sacraments varied widely. Since the thirteenth century, their number has been set at seven in the Roman Catholic and Eastern churches: baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, ordination, marriage, and anointing of the sick.

The Reformation churches reduced the number of sacraments to two or three, with baptism and the Lord’s Supper always recognized as the most important. It was argued that sacraments were to be limited to those practices clearly instituted by Christ and the apostles. Even more important than the Reformers’ reduction in the number of sacraments, however, was their insistence on two basic points: first, the inseparability of Word and sacrament; and second, the importance in both Word and sacrament of the working of the Spirit and of the response of faith. These emphases countered every quasi-magical view of the nature and efficacy of the sacraments.⁵³¹

From the earliest times, two tendencies in interpreting the sacraments have been evident. One emphasizes the objective reality of God’s grace in and through the sacraments. Those who hold to this view see the sacraments as divinely appointed rites

that, when properly administered, convey grace and salvation if there are no impediments. The sacraments are said to be efficacious in themselves (*ex opere operato*). This tendency is found, for example, in Ignatius, who speaks of the Lord's Supper as the "medicine of immortality"; in Augustine, who held against the Donatists that the effectiveness of the sacrament does not depend upon the purity or worthiness of the celebrant; and in the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation, according to which the substance of the bread and wine is changed into the substance of the body and blood of Christ when the eucharist is properly administered by a duly ordained priest.

The second tendency in the interpretation of the sacraments emphasizes the importance of our faith response. According to this view, the sacraments are dramatic signs of the grace of God and are effective not in themselves but only as they are received by faith. The sacraments are not so much something done to us as something that we do — we repent, we confess our faith, we vow to be faithful. According to this view, the purpose of the sacraments is to give people the opportunity to bear public witness to their faith. The sacraments are public acts of commitment and public expressions of loyalty to Christ.

These two tendencies struggle with each other in the church and in theology up to the present. The danger of the more objective view by itself is that it minimizes the importance of the response of faith and seems to disregard the freedom of the Spirit. Viewed purely objectively, the grace of God mediated by sacramental action is depersonalized and reified. The danger of the more subjective view by itself is that it obscures the unconditional and objective reality of God's grace. These two tendencies are not to be correlated respectively with the Roman Catholic and Reformation traditions. Elements of both tendencies are present to some degree in both traditions. Both Catholic and Protestant theologians today increasingly emphasize the personal character of God's self-communication in Word and sacrament. There is an effort to get beyond the impasses of traditional sacramental controversies. One way of doing this is to redefine the meaning of sacrament in such a way that Christ becomes the paradigm of what is sacramental, and the theology of the sacraments becomes more adequately trinitarian. Thus Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, and Edward Schillebeeckx contend that Jesus Christ is the primary sacrament. It is in Christ that the decisive presence and activity of God in and through a finite reality occurs. This Christocentric redefinition of sacrament underscores the free, personal presence of God's grace in concrete, worldly form while also insisting that grace, as personal presence, makes room for and calls for free personal response.

If Christ is the primary sacrament, then those rites of the church that are called sacraments will correspond to their archetype. The sacraments are celebrated in Christ and re-present Christ. God comes to human beings personally by the power of the Holy Spirit in the concrete, worldly media of spoken word and enacted sacrament. The gospel of God's costly love is both spoken to us and enacted in our midst. Both Word and sacrament re-present in different ways the gift and demand of God's unconditional grace in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Since Vatican II it is possible to speak of a growing convergence among Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians in the understanding of the sacraments. This convergence is marked by several features: (1) an emphasis on the inseparability of Word and sacraments; (2) a trinitarian and Christocentric interpretation of both the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the sacraments; (3) an effort to interpret the sacraments in a way that illuminates the “sacramental” character of the whole of creation; and (4) a concern to make as explicit as possible the connection between the sacraments, Christian life, and Christian ethics.

The Meaning of Baptism

Christian baptism is the sacrament of initiation into life in Christ. It marks the beginning of the journey of faith and discipleship that lasts throughout one’s life. In baptism a person is immersed in water, or water is poured or sprinkled upon him or her, in the triune name of God.

1. Authorization of baptism is often found in the command of Jesus: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:19-20).

Important as this passage has been in the history of baptismal practice, baptism is based not only on the command of Jesus but on the act of Jesus in freely submitting himself to baptism. Jesus commences his vocation, his obedient response to the call of God, by being baptized by John. In this act, Jesus enters into solidarity with lost humanity. He begins the life of costly love and service that eventually leads to his passion, death, and resurrection. Jesus’ baptism thus signifies his solidarity with the sinners and outcasts of this world and his complete obedience to his Father’s will. As described by the evangelists, this self-identification of Jesus with sinful humanity is met by God’s identification of him as the beloved Son and by the descent of the Spirit of God on him (Mark 1:9-11).

Jesus uses the image of baptism in relating the life of his disciples to his own mission of self-expending love: “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38). The event of baptism thus marks the beginning of the Christian’s participation in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. It signals one’s death to an old way of life and one’s birth to the new life in Christ. Christians are given a Christian name, and their whole life becomes a journey of faith in which they enter ever more fully into their baptismal identity. They become participants in the life and love of the triune God in whose name they are baptized.

2. The New Testament unfolds the meaning of baptism in many rich images. Each of them is important and complements the others.⁵³²

(a.) Baptism is described as a dying and rising with Christ. The descent into the water signifies the Christian's identification with the passion and death of Christ, whereby the power that sin has in the old way of life is broken, and the Christian's ascent from the water signifies a participation in the new life based on the power of the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:3-4).

(b.) Baptism is also pictured as the washing of a sin-stained life. Just as water washes away the dirt of the body, so God's forgiveness washes away the sins of those who are truly repentant (1 Cor. 6:11). Those who are pardoned and cleansed by Christ receive in baptism a fresh start in life and a new ethical orientation.

(c.) Baptism is further portrayed as a rebirth by the Holy Spirit and a receiving of the gift of the Spirit (John 3:5; Acts 2:38). While the Holy Spirit is at work everywhere in creation, giving and renewing life, the New Testament closely associates the gift of new life in the Spirit with baptism.

(d.) Incorporation is another image of baptism in the New Testament. By this act we are united with Christ, with each other, and with the people of God in every time and place. Welcomed into the covenant community by baptism, we are no longer solitary individuals, but instead members of a new family and citizens of a new society (Eph. 2:19). This new society is one in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female (Gal. 3:28).

(e.) Baptism is also a sign of God's coming reign. It is the beginning of the Christian's movement in faith toward that reign. By baptism Christians receive the Spirit as the "firstfruits" (Rom. 8:23) of the harvest to come and are set in solidarity with the whole groaning creation, which eagerly awaits the fulfillment of God's purposes and the coming of God's justice and peace.

3. If baptism is the commencement of Christian life, signifying a dying and rising with Christ, a cleansing from sin, a receiving of the life-giving Spirit, a welcoming into God's new society of love, and the start of a faith journey toward God's coming renewal of all things, what sense does it make to baptize infants?

Both Luther and Calvin defended infant baptism, although they rejected aspects of the theology of baptism taught by the Roman Catholic Church.⁵³³ However, strong objections to infant baptism have been raised for centuries by those in the Baptist traditions. More recently, they have been raised within Reformed theology by Karl Barth.⁵³⁴ Barth's objections to infant baptism can be summarized as follows:

(a.) Infant baptism has no explicit basis in Scripture. While the possibility that infant baptism was practiced in the apostolic age cannot be excluded, all evidence seems to point to the conclusion that it became a practice of the church only in the post-apostolic period.

(b.) Barth argues further that infant baptism has led to the disastrous assumption that people become Christians virtually by birth. Grace is thus cheapened, and the gospel is spread by subtle and sometimes overt coercion. In Barth's

judgment, infant baptism has contributed to the serious sickness and impotence of the church in the modern era.

(c.) Barth's central theological argument is that infant baptism obscures the meaning of baptism as an entrance into free and responsible Christian discipleship. In baptism there is first an action of God (baptism with the Spirit) and then a corresponding human action (baptism with water): there is a divine gift and a human response. Baptism attests God's grace and marks the beginning of the new life in Christ. Since baptism is a free and glad human answer to God's gracious activity in Jesus Christ, and since this answer must be fully responsible, Barth thinks that infant baptism obscures and distorts the meaning of baptism.

What can be said in response to Barth's objections? In reply to his first point, reference has often been made to the covenantal promises of God given to believers and to their children (Acts 2:39), as well as to the fact that entire households were sometimes baptized in the apostolic period (Acts 16:33). Still, the historical evidence is slim, and it must be conceded that the case for infant baptism cannot be made on the grounds that it was undeniably practiced in the New Testament church.

Nor can we deny Barth's second charge that infant baptism has been subjected to much abuse in the history of the church. A similar criticism, however, could be leveled against virtually every theological doctrine and liturgical practice of the church. The distortion of a doctrine or the abuse of a practice calls for correction and reform but not necessarily elimination.

The real issue, then, is the theological permissibility of infant baptism under certain conditions. Should churches baptize only adults or may they baptize infants as well as adults, and under what conditions?

Common to both infant and adult baptism practices is the affirmation that we are recipients of the gift of God's love and are claimed for God's service. Just as in the Lord's Supper we are fed by the bread of life and the cup of salvation, so baptism declares that we are first of all recipients of an action, that something is done for us. Whether baptized as children or adults, our baptism signifies primarily what God has graciously done for us, and it is upon this that faith rests.

It can be argued that the two forms of baptism — infant and adult — together express the full meaning of baptism better than each would alone. In other words, their meanings are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Adult baptism gives greater play to the conscious and free response of a person to God's forgiving love in Jesus Christ. It stresses explicit public confession and personal commitment to the way of Christ. But if practiced exclusively, adult baptism may tend toward a view of faith as preceding rather than responding to God's initiative. It may also foster a false individualism to the extent that it neglects the importance of the community in the process of one's growth in faith

and Christian discipleship in both childhood and adulthood. The fact that in traditions that baptize adults exclusively there is often a dedication and commitment service for infants and their parents points to the need for some public recognition of the responsibility of the church for nurturing children in the life of faith. Infant baptism, on the other hand, declares the sovereign grace and initiative of God. It demonstrates that even when they are helpless, human beings are loved and affirmed by God. It proclaims, as Karl Rahner says, that God loves this child.⁵³⁵ It expresses God's loving reception of the child into a covenant community that takes responsibility for helping this child to mature in faith. It makes clear that baptism is a beginning of the process of growing into Christ, and that this process of growth cannot take place without a supportive community of faith.

Since the chief objection to infant baptism is that it undercuts the necessity of free and conscious acceptance of the life of discipleship, it is imperative that the practice of infant baptism be dissociated from every semblance of the dispensation of cheap grace. Some kind of "commissioning" service must link together infant baptism and the free, personal response of the person baptized. Baptism and faith are inseparably related. The question is simply one of time. Must the response of faith on the part of the baptized be simultaneous with or immediately follow the event of baptism? After all, as Barth would surely agree, God is patient. God's grace is not coercive but gives humanity time. Of course, the patience of God must not be used as an argument for casually postponing a response. It is appropriate, however, to refer to God's patience in giving children who have been baptized time to come of age, stand on their own feet, and respond freely and gladly to the call to discipleship already at work in their lives. In the meantime, there is a faith that is already responding to the enacted grace of God in the baptism of the infant. It is the faith of the parents and the community in whose midst the child is baptized. While their faith cannot simply substitute for that of the child, it can help prepare the way for the child's eventual free response to her or his baptism. Parents and congregation vow to provide a Christian environment for their children until the day when they are ready to speak for themselves.

Does the Holy Spirit work in infants? Geoffrey Bromiley is surely right to say that it would be shocking to answer this question in the negative. The Holy Spirit can and does work in the lives of infants and children through the ministrations of their parents, guardians, teachers, and friends. Why not also through the proper practice of infant baptism?⁵³⁶ The working of God's Spirit is not restricted by gender, race, or class. Neither is it restricted by age.

I conclude, therefore, that while the practice of infant baptism is not absolutely necessary in the life of the church, it may be permissible. And whether it is permissible depends on whether it is being practiced as a routine social rite, or as a form of cheap, magical grace, or instead with the clear understanding that it proclaims the unconditional grace of God in Jesus Christ and calls both parents

and community to responsibility for the care, nurture, and guidance of the baptized child in the life of faith, hope, and love.

Infant baptism, responsibly practiced, is a sign of God's gracious initiative in creation and redemption. It is a powerful expression of the fact that God loves us even before we begin to respond to God in trust and love. It proclaims the love of God as sheer gift.

Further, infant baptism is a sign of human solidarity in the presence of God. At no stage of human life are we isolated from each other or from God. The grace of God draws us deeply into relationship; it is formative of new community. Because the grace of God aims at the transformation not only of individuals but also of our life together as families and communities, the practice of infant baptism is theologically legitimate and meaningful.

Finally, infant baptism is a sign of covenantal responsibility as a community of faith and most especially as parents of the child brought to baptism. If people are indifferent to or negligent of their responsibility as parents to bring up their children in a home and a congregational environment that guides them toward their own free, personal decision about Christian faith and discipleship, it is unlikely that their sense of social responsibility will be very strong in regard to people beyond the family circle or local church. Especially in our age of broken homes, one-parent families, and many abused and abandoned children, infant baptism could be a strong and unambiguous declaration of the fact that God loves these and all children. When infant baptism is taken with appropriate seriousness, parents and other members of the congregation of Jesus Christ are called to responsibility for the care and nurture of children in the life of faith.

4. A special problem for the theology of baptism today is whether it is permissible to substitute other words for the traditional trinitarian formula in the service of baptism to avoid gender-specific language of God. This question does not have an easy answer. On the one hand, the classical trinitarian images are part of the service of baptism recognized by the ecumenical church and cannot be removed by unilateral action of a congregation or denomination without serious repercussions in ecumenical relationships. Moreover, if we were to speak of the triune God only with reference to God's relation to us — for example, as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier — such terms, while fundamental in Christian language of God, would not properly identify the relationships of the triune persons in God's own being. Exclusively functional trinitarian language veers in the direction of modalism.

On the other hand, exclusive masculine imagery of God courts idolatry and must be challenged. We should eschew liturgical fundamentalism that refuses any modifications, expansions, or alternatives to the traditional trinitarian formula. Baptism "in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is not a magical

incantation. It is a witness to the love of the triune God who lives in communion and who welcomes all into the new human community founded on grace alone.

Brian Wren is doubtless correct in pleading for more serious theological work, more creative imagination, and more responsible expansion of our language of the triune God in hymn, prayer, and liturgy. Guided by God's Word and Spirit, the church should be open to fresh trinitarian imagery that will complement — not replace — the traditional trinitarian images.⁵³⁷ Among the proposals meriting careful consideration is to expand the baptismal formula so as to interpret the traditional images in gender-free words. This might, for example, take the form: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; the Source of Life, the Word of Life, and the Gift of Life."⁵³⁸