

A Baptizing Community

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“Go and make disciples of all people by baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and by teaching them to pay close attention to everything I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20). These are familiar words to Christians. But do we get their point? When we think of our congregations, how long does it take for us to recall that they are *baptizing* communities?¹

We should, quite intentionally, think and speak of the church as a baptizing community. Involved here are the church’s *identity* and its *activity*.

Identity

A Baptized Community

A baptizing community is, in the first place, a *baptized* community. Martin Luther summarized, “To be baptized in God’s name is to be baptized not by human beings but by God himself” (LC IV 10)², for in baptism the good name of the Triune God is invoked over people (Jas. 2:7). They “put on” Christ (Gal. 3:27). Baptism gives all that Christ gives. Thus, it forms the cornerstone of identity for the baptizing community.

Too often we relegate baptism to the back seat. We treat it as a hedge against the prospect that an infant will not survive to hear God’s Word preached and taught in church, Sunday School, and family devotions. It’s as if we think that hearing the Gospel is the *real* means of spiritual nurture, leaving baptism in the past. Yet in the Large Catechism Luther

¹This question, and others similar to it, provided the basis for an October, 2001 consultation hosted by Dr. David Mulder, Director of Outreach Ministries for the Board for District and Congregational Services of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Other participants were Dr. Paul Deterding, Pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Carson City, Nevada; Melissa Galschutt, DCO Intern with LCMS national Outreach Ministry; Dr. Paul Mueller, Concordia University, St. Paul; Dr. Joel Okamoto, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis; President Howard Patten of the LCMS Kansas District; and the present author, who was assigned to draw on the consultation and compose this article on behalf of LCMS national Outreach Ministry. The Rev. Roosevelt Gray, Mission and Ministry Facilitator with the LCMS Michigan District and Professor John Pless of Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne provided papers for the consultation but were unable to attend. (The consultation was underwritten by a Churchwide Grant from Aid Association for Lutherans and Lutheran Brotherhood.)

²Quotations (such as this one) from Luther’s Large Catechism are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

recognized the ongoing dimension of baptism. He recommended the comforting saying: “But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body” (LC IV 44). Baptism constitutes not only a past but also a present reality (“I *am* baptized”)! We will not catch on fully to the church as a baptizing community until we appreciate this present reality more deeply.

In baptism, God unites people with Christ in His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:1-11, Col. 2:11-3:4). We continually return to baptism in contrition and repentance. Through baptism we are justified by grace (Rom. 6:7; 1 Cor. 6:11; Tit. 3:5-7). In short, “the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is that it saves” (LC IV 24; see 1 Pet. 3:21).

Baptism effects a change in lordship as it claims people for Christ. This fact remains less apparent in 21st century American culture than it is on mission fields where the newly-baptized are sometimes ostracized by their friends and family members. But as Luther noted almost 500 years ago, “it is no joke at all to take action against the devil [in baptism] and not only to drive him from the little child but also to hang around the child’s neck such a mighty lifelong enemy” as Satan.³ Through baptism, people enslaved to Satan are set free in Christ.

Therefore a sense of urgency comes to characterize the baptizing community. The delivery of salvation in baptism and the other means of grace is the ultimate matter, and the night is coming when no one can work.

A Baptized Community

Baptism brings about a corporate concern. After all, it is not simply a collection of individuals that Christ has washed and cleansed in baptism to be His holy and unblemished bride, but rather *the church* (Eph. 5:26-27).

Baptism stands out as the great leveler between people who are totally sinful in themselves yet totally forgiven in Christ. “For indeed we all were baptized by one Spirit into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all given to drink one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13; see Gal. 3:27-28). Whatever other differences we may have, through baptism we are incorporated into one body, a body that already existed before we were brought into it. As members of this baptized and baptizing community, then, we recognize and cherish our unity in Christ which transcends differences of ethnic origin, gender, occupation, talent and abilities, socioeconomic status, etc.

³Luther’s Small Catechism, Baptism Booklet, paragraph 3.

Several implications follow. First, we who are baptized have more in common with our fellow-baptized than we do with people who share our sort of interests or income. We have more in common with baptized people of Christ's church in Ghana than we do with our unbaptized neighbors next door.

Second: within a congregation, baptism is THE force of assimilation. We are "baptized into one." Behavioral observation and sociological research can be valuable in their own right. But there can be no better indicator of a person's assimilation into the body of Christ than baptism and faithfulness to baptism in hearing God's Word, receiving His absolution, or eating and drinking Christ's body and blood under bread and wine in the Lord's Supper.

By these means God sustains His baptized community against the hostile forces that surround it. Those who have been baptized into one body, given one Spirit to drink, are in a position to say to the world: "We don't believe your lies!" Instead, we can tell the Good News about Jesus.

A final implication is that particular congregations are manifestations of a church that is universal (catholic) in space and time. Our challenge is to reflect such solidarity in corporate life. Here we are helped by the church's historic liturgy, the accrued testimony and worship of all God's people, past as well as present. It is more likely to plumb the depths of God's character and of true worship than anything we devise "on the fly."

A Baptized Community is a Baptizing Community

Nothing is more natural for us as a baptized community than to be a baptizing community. But in this effort we have to die.

Think of it: in reaching out to the unbaptized, boasting of self is squeezed out. We have to grow unconcerned about popularity, about avoiding embarrassment, or about maximizing our own convenience. Over the years, Christians have risked their very lives to bring baptism to the unbaptized and the unbaptized to baptism.

Our old Adam wants no part of any of this. In our sin, we would prefer to boast about ourselves than to boast in the Lord. But in baptism we have died with Christ. Dead to the sinful instincts that would have us boast about ourselves, we can forget worrying over the reaction of others. Regardless of their approval or the lack thereof, we have been justified by God's grace and in baptism we rise to a new life with Christ. Considering ourselves dead to sin and alive to

God in Christ (Rom 6:11), we understand that as new creatures in Christ we genuinely want to tell those around us the Good News of salvation. We have the power to open our lips not as a result of coercion by the law, but rather as we are motivated by God's grace (Rom. 6:14).

It is wonderful when we think seriously about unbaptized or unchurched people to bring to baptism. Similarly, it is good to identify opportunities to nurture those who are already baptized. Yet the power actually to baptize (and teach) does not come, strictly speaking, from the magnitude of the need. Still less is this power unleashed by the imperative to meet the need. The power flows from God's gracious Word. As Luther wrote of baptism itself: ". . . if we had nothing more than these words, 'Go and baptize,' etc., we would still have to accept it as God's ordinance and perform it. But here we have not only God's commandment and injunction, but the promise as well. Therefore it is far more glorious than anything else God has commanded and ordained; in short, it is so full of comfort and grace that heaven and earth cannot comprehend it" (LC IV 38-39).

The difficulties of Christian vocation always compel us to look to the Lord and lay hold of His promises. But nothing throws us, God's baptized people, back upon the power and promise of our baptism quite like the evangelism aspect of our vocation as God's royal priesthood. It is our privilege as well as our duty to speak with others about the most important thing in life, about what makes the difference in their lives between ultimate bliss and eventual damnation. We get to tell them of the Christ Who died and rose for them, and in the process remind ourselves that He did the same for us. By being joined with Christ in His dying and rising through baptism, we have already been reduced to nothing, then exalted to the heights. Our boast can only be in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:31).

Activity

Much of the time churchmen spend thinking about the church's activity is devoted to "nuts and bolts" considerations. In a military analogy, these might be called *tactics*. Yet we should not neglect larger questions, such as why we are doing what we are doing, and how the answer to the "why" can shape the "how." In other words, let's not overlook *strategy*.

Strategy

It is important for us to think of the church in two ways. First, it is *an end in itself*, a passive receiver of Christ's love and forgiveness. Yet the church is also *a means to an end*, the Lord's base of baptizing and proclaiming activity in this dead and dying world. "The Holy Spirit will remain with the holy community or Christian people until the Last Day. Through it he

gathers us, using it to teach and preach the Word” (LC II 53). This is the church that Jesus told to “Go and make disciples, baptizing.” (Matt. 28:19).

The church is God’s instrument. Rather than waiting for the world to come to us, we take the gospel and baptism to the world. As members of the baptizing community we recognize and play the parts we can, within our respective callings, to support the mission of reaching, baptizing, and teaching. For example, laypeople will tell their friends the Good News about Jesus, invite them to church, perhaps serve as sponsors for unbaptized or unchurched people who are learning more about the Christian faith.

Although the gates of hell will not prevail against the church as a whole (Matt. 16:18) a particular congregation has no promise that it will continue to exist as such until the Lord comes again. Congregations must constantly be ready to die so others can hear about Jesus and be baptized in His name. Occasionally, this may mean going out of organizational existence. More commonly, it will call upon a baptizing community to be willing to “pour out its life” on behalf of unbaptized and unchurched people: digging deep into its resources, making sacrifices of time, etc. The baptizing community and its members realize that it is here for Christ’s mission, and this mission includes offering baptism to the unbaptized. Starting with baptism, it has been taken up into God’s activity in Christ to seek and save the lost.

Through the ongoing proclamation of Law and Gospel, the church is re-oriented to its role as a baptizing community and re-activated in it. The need for such re-orientation, which results from repentance, is perhaps nowhere more apparent than when conflict arises within a baptizing community, and consequently the church is tempted to close in on itself. Treating one another with love in the midst of conflict and resolving conflicts in accord with God’s Word – including the appropriate use of confession and absolution (a return to baptism!) – can enable the baptizing community to stay on track with its mission. The way it handles conflict can prove impressive to the unbaptized and unchurched.

Even as the baptizing community is busy baptizing others, it never gets away from the baptism in which it had its birth. Another way a baptizing community walks in baptism is continually to unfold for the baptized the faith into which they are baptized. This occurs through catechesis and Christian education. The Christian faith does not make for a mere set of items to be amassed on an intellectual inventory. Confession of the faith is adherence to baptism.

Tactics

Baptism can play a more prominent role in a baptizing community's "on the ground," day-in and day-out efforts to bring baptism to the unbaptized and bring the baptized back to their baptism. Here are some samples:

- Baptism can provide a good "opener" for evangelistic conversation. Instead of bridging to the gospel with the question, "In which religious community did you grow up?" (as good a transition as that can be!), consider saying, "You know, I my baptism took place when I was two weeks old. How about you?"
- At a time when people think of "God" in very generic terms, you can be much more specific by saying, "I'm baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."
- Since we have been baptized into Christ's dying and rising, baptism provides a natural point of departure for us to indicate that what He did, He did FOR ME. This approach can help keep the grace of God front and center in evangelistic conversation. For, ultimately, we are not seeking to satisfy the curiosity of people or to help them solve intellectual problems. We are talking about salvation only God can deliver. In baptism God stakes a claim that only He can make.

Conclusion

"Suppose there were a physician who had so much skill that people would not die, or even though they died would afterward live forever," Luther mused. "Just think how the world would snow and rain money upon such a person! Because of the throng of rich people crowding around, no one else would be able to get near. Now, here in baptism there is brought, free of charge, to every person's door just such a treasure and medicine that swallows up death . . ." (LC IV 43). The church, having herself benefited from this "medicine," now brings it to a dying world.

The church is indeed a baptizing community. A baptizing community reaches out to others with baptism in the saving name of the Triune God.