

On Baptism and Baptists

For me, one of the real joys of this time of year is that, thanks to a happy conjunction of the sacred and secular calendars, I get to spend a couple of weeks contemplating very Baptist themes. In the Church calendar, it is the season of Epiphany and the first Sunday after the Feast of Epiphany itself is always marked with readings concerning the baptism of Jesus. For our forebears in the faith, it was their stance on the meaning and practice of baptism that set them apart from the rest of the Protestant Reformation, so much so that our movement has been known now for four hundred years as “Baptists.” Meanwhile, in the secular calendar of our country, the third Monday of January has been celebrated since 1986 as Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, in memorial of the great civil rights leader who was also a Baptist pastor.

So, I’m excited this morning to have the excuse to briefly link for you the nearly universal church observations of Epiphany and the baptism of Jesus with a review of what makes Baptists “Baptist” and why that still matters in a day that scholars are beginning to call “post-denominational.” I believe, you see, that traditional Baptist distinctives are still important for the way we relate to our Creator God and to God’s beautiful creation, especially as we regard the wonderful diversity of humankind and human culture. I find in the lessons of Baptist theology and polity important lessons for the Body of Christ, not in an exclusionary way, as if Baptists held the corner on all truth, but in a way of inclusion that reminds us all to invite each other into full fellowship.

So, to begin, what are we doing talking about baptism just a week after we’ve celebrated the visit of the Magi to the Baby Jesus, the event of the Wise Men or Three Kings being what is most connected with Epiphany? You may remember that the word “epiphany” itself has to do with the appearance or manifestation of the divine. The tradition of the Church, dating back to very early times, has been to use this season, beginning immediately after the twelve days of Christmastide, to trace the stories of how Jesus of Nazareth was revealed to his contemporaries and followers as the Son of God. We begin with his initial revelation to the Gentiles, the foreign-born and pagan Magi. Besides the story of his baptism, including the announcement from heaven of Jesus as “the beloved son,” the season of Epiphany also generally includes the stories of Jesus’ first miracle at the wedding in Cana and of the Transfiguration, each a story of how his identity as the Word of God made flesh was revealed. We got a quick taste of all these stories in our second hymn this morning, “Sing of God Made Manifest.” Epiphany also carries a theme of Jesus as the Light of the World, tying the idea of Christ Revealed to the metaphor of light dawning on those who had lived in darkness, as Isaiah wrote. That’s part of why I chose the upbeat “Shine, Jesus, Shine” to open our service this morning.

Now, any time we read the story of Jesus’ baptism, some will be puzzled as Matthew records that John the Baptizer himself was puzzled. Why was Jesus, the sinless one, baptized? Matthew records, “John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented.” I’ve speculated on this question a couple of times previously and offered 4 possibilities. First, Jesus may have been baptized by John out of a sense of obedience. A true prophet of God had issued God’s call for all Israel to be baptized and so Jesus, the obedient son, answers the call, regardless of what others may have thought. Second, Jesus could have come to be baptized in order to be identified with all of us. The Sinless One stands in solidarity with those who have confessed their sins, aligning himself with

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all humankind, pointing us toward our own potential righteousness. Another possibility is that Jesus' baptism was for him a symbolic act of the inauguration of the Kingdom of God. Just as all of humankind received a new beginning through water in the story of Noah, just as Israel was brought out of Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea and into the Promised Land through the waters of Jordan, so, too, is the new Israel, the community of Christ, is brought out of bondage and into new and abundant life through the waters of baptism. Finally, Jesus' baptism stands as example to us. As we read in Matthew 28, Jesus wants all persons in all nations to follow him in baptism and he leads by example.

In turn, we are also baptized, in part, out of simple obedience. The imperative in Matthew 28:19-20 leaves us little choice in the matter, if we are to follow the way 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." We are to be baptized and to baptize in turn. Of course, if you are anything like me, you need a reason other than "because it says so." I can think of at least two. To participate in the public act of baptism, whether it's performed in a church baptistery or a creek or a lake or a swimming pool, is to state in a powerful and public way, "I have decided to follow Jesus." In enacting our Master's command, we are making ourselves accountable to all of those who witness our action and to those who later hear of it or see the pictures on Facebook. Just as Jesus identified himself with us, so we identify ourselves with him. My second reason is based in my own experience of the act itself. We Baptists do not assign a sacramental value to baptism; that is, we do not claim that a salvific act of God necessarily accompanies our symbolic action. But the symbolism of the action is deep and potent. My vivid memories of my own baptism, now forty-three years in the past, provide me with a spiritual anchor point in my life. My acceptance of Jesus as my Lord came some weeks before but the action of confirming that choice before my community of faith in a way that Christians had done before me for almost two millennia was meaningful in a way I can only begin to stumblingly relate.

It was in their rediscovery of this profound act of witness and encounter with the Holy One that our Anabaptist and Baptist forebears set themselves apart from the rest of Christendom. In turning away from the nearly universal custom of using Christian baptism to welcome the newborn into society, both sacred and secular, those early dippers scandalized their neighbors, both Protestant and Catholic, and set the course by which they would become the radical embodiment of Enlightenment theology just as the country in which they would become most successful became the embodiment of Enlightenment political thought. Since the days of Roger Williams, Baptists and America have had a symbiotic relationship. Only in the wide-open spaces of America, with apologies to Native Americans, where individual effort and drive was at a premium, could the Baptist theology of "Soul Competence" have truly flourished. Only in a United States where Baptist leaders like Isaac Backus and John Leyland insisted on a true separation of Church and State could the experiment of a democratic republic have survived. In celebrating Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the next weeks, Americans will be, unwittingly perhaps, raising up a great exemplar of the ethos that represents the better angels of our society.

Tied up, you see, with our insistence as Baptists upon baptism for the believer and not for the infant is the idea that no human may take it upon him or herself to speak for another in matters of faith. This is the principle of "soul competence," what the great Baptist theologian E.Y. Mullins,

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in his 1908 book, The Axioms of Religion, called “the distinctive belief of Baptists.” Mullins pointed to the belief in “the competency of the soul in religion” as the foundation of all other Baptists beliefs. We are competent, under God, to form our relationship with God, to interpret scriptures and to build our belief systems. Because we are created in the image of God, we have both understanding and free will. We are not coerced by God, although the voice of faith may confess God's sovereignty. We are free to choose God or to choose against God. We are free to understand God in our own ways. We are, of course, responsible for our choices, as the Bible also teaches. We are responsible for the choices in our lives both to God and to our neighbors, which is why Jesus affirmed the greatest commandments to be “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind;” and, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

The fierce individualism of Baptists in matters of faith, which so mirrors the fierce individualism of American democracy in matters of politics, is tempered, therefore, by our love for and responsibility to both God and our neighbors. In Baptist life, we are called to maintain a balance between our individual freedom to interpret the Scriptures and set the course of our life under God and the obligation of love to live in peace with our neighbors, to support them and encourage them and not to cause them to stumble. It simply will not do to fall prey to the temptation that has claimed so many Baptists over the years and say, “God has given me and not you the truth and so I reject you.” We must balance between freedom and responsibility, autonomy and interdependence. The key comes to us in a verse from the prophet Micah, one that you have heard from me many times as it is a personal favorite and one from which I'll be preaching next week as it is this year's focus for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity: “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” I'm glad, by the way, for the juxtaposition of a focus on our Baptist tradition and upon Christian Unity. One must understand one's own tradition before one can appreciate the traditions of others.

But let us make no mistake, my sisters and brothers – we need those whose understandings of God and the Way of Jesus are different from ours so that we may continually evaluate and strengthen our own understandings. As Baptists, we believe in autonomy but we also believe in interdependence. If we truly listen to other people who share our thirst for God and whose search is honest and humble, we will hear God's voice through them, even if or perhaps especially when their conclusions differ from our own. Truly, our souls are competent to undertake the search for God's will but none of us can claim to know the whole plan of God. Not even Jesus, prior to his death and resurrection, would claim such a thing. As I said to the Assembly of the Church Council of Greater Seattle last March upon my inauguration and later to you, “we need to celebrate the diversity of our theological understandings. Those who do things “decently and in order” need to learn from the improvisational worship and polity of the Pentecostals and vice-versa. Those whose structure is congregational need to listen to those with bishops and other hierarchical offices and vice-versa. Evangelicals and liturgicals, Calvinist and Arminian, Orthodox and Tridentine, all have their roles to play. As the Body of Christ, we need both the flying imaginations of the liberals and the careful grounding of the fundamentalists. Hear me, my brothers and sisters, I am convinced that those with whom we disagree most profoundly on matters of theology are likely those who have the most to teach us.”

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It may seem to some of you that I have gone mighty far afield from a simple discussion of the baptism of Jesus by John in the River Jordan. But to me, these are the concepts that coming crowding in when I consider the essence of baptism, which is also for me the essence of being a Baptist. Just as my journey as an adult follower of Jesus dates back to my own baptism, so I believe that the theology of our Baptist Movement springs from the theological understanding of that act and its repercussions. I've given you a pretty condensed view of a lot of ideas this morning but I understand there's some sort of televised contest going on in a city in the Southeastern U.S. this morning in which some of you have more than a vague interest. Does anyone want to know the current score or are you waiting for TiVo? In fact, there is a pretty good condensation in the hymn we sang just before the sermon. The Disciples of Christ, you know, are our cousins in the faith, having grown out of a splinter Baptist group.

One last thing – although it's not part of Good Shepherd's tradition to close with an altar call, I want us to sing a hymn of invitation this morning. I'm not going to stand at the front and wait for repentant sinners or anxious converts to walk the aisle but I want us all this morning, as good Baptists, to recall that moment of decision in our own lives. Do you remember that time when you said, in your heart, "Yes, I will follow Jesus?" If you didn't grow up in this tradition, it may have been at your confirmation or your first communion. But whenever it was, what did it mean to you then. And more importantly, what does it mean to you now? How are you keeping that commitment? Have you grown in your understanding and in your ability to follow? If not, what do think is holding you back? All of this is part of the ongoing experience of living as a baptized person as well. Our proclamation should not be "I was saved" but rather "I am being saved." The journey, begun in whatever water we may cite, never ends until someday, as good Baptists in the past have said, we find ourselves "on the far side banks of Jordan."

For the mighty act of baptism, for our heritage as Baptists, for the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, thanks be to God.