

Death, Life, and Baptism (3)

Colleagues,

Today brings the third installment of Craig Simenson's extended essay on baptism as God's best gift for the challenge of living well in the face of death. All God's gifts are woefully underused, and this one more than most, an observation that prompted Craig to write the essay in the first place. As we noted in the introduction to the [first installment](#), he aims finally to lay out a proposal for addressing that underuse through congregational worship practices. This constitutes the fourth part of his paper, which we won't get to here, at least not for now. I surmised in that first introduction that we might pass it along after Easter, but second and third thoughts incline me now to wait longer. After all, Craig was a seminarian when he thought his proposal through, and it suddenly seems fair to me that he be given the chance to see how it plays out in the practicalities of today's parish life. So perhaps we'll write to him in a year or so—he took up his first call just this past month—and inquire how it's going; and should he be so inclined, what a gift it would be to hear him reflect on the contrast, if any, between the seminarian's vision and the pastor's discoveries. Then, I think, is when we'll pass along Part Four, if that's what we do.

For now, revel in the careful thinking that undergirds whatever else Craig had in mind when he wrote. Here for all of us is substance that we need to chew on over and over again—not once, not now and then, but daily, as Craig insists. Again, an apology for my abysmal failure to get my iMac email program to deliver endnotes in anything other than Roman numerals; and a second apology for waiting until now to send you Craig's bibliography, apart from which the endnotes can be opaque. Look for it at the

end.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce, for the editorial team

From “‘Make us Die Every Day’: Baptism, Death, and Daily Prayer”
Craig F. Simenson
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Part 3. Baptized into the death and life of Christ

As already evidenced by the discussion thus far, I believe that the transformative and embodied vision of Christian baptism offers a helpful corrective lens to many of our misconceptions about the often sharply-drawn demarcation between life and death, and a way of rehearsing for our lives as they are lived in relationship to death. For one, baptismal language and its direct account of dying and rising runs us straight into the heart of our discomfort with death and our frequent inability to express it. The sacrament of baptism is much more than figurative language, however. In so far as baptism is a celebrative act of worship involving our anointed foreheads (or entirely-immersed bodies), our voices lifted in song, the laying on of hands, a candle lit and shining for all to see, it also suggests the essential role that our bodily senses play in the life of Christian worship. Though Luther refused to deem these bodily signs alone as necessary to the efficacy of the sacrament—for him, baptism was ultimately established by the meeting of the divine promise and faith—he advocated for full-immersion baptism so that its full significance as “symbol” of death and resurrection be forcefully experienced and felt.[i]

Importantly, baptism serves as a key cord roped throughout the length of Christian life, tying together our birth into the body of the church and our inevitable deaths as bodies and souls

commended into the hands of God. According to Luther and others, baptism is not an act that needs repeating. Rather, once pronounced over us—even for those fallen away from the faith of baptism—the truth of God’s promise remains ever steadfast, “always ready to receive us back with open arms when we return.”[ii] Before drawing hard and fast lines between the faithful and the unfaithful (or between those inside the church and those outside of it), however, we should remember that no one is exempted from this situation of repentance, a situation that is in the end common to all of us who share these vulnerable and dying bodies. Applying Luther’s teaching of *simul iustus et peccator*, those of us who have been baptized can in no way speak triumphantly of our final baptism over and against others. For Luther, even those baptized “need continually to be baptized more and more, until we fulfill the sign perfectly at the last day.”[iii] In other words, even as baptism signifies our “full and complete justification,”[iv] we remain acknowledged sinners—simultaneously always falling away and always being received again. As Matthew Myer Boulton comments, the Christian life which is fundamentally a baptismal life for Luther is consequently also an “itinerant life” of ongoing penance, a life unfolding before us like a “pilgrim’s path,” a life of “continually returning to faith in God’s baptismal promises.”[v] In the way of the ever-repenting traveler, we are only guided down the road to the final completion of our baptism through daily living and dying. To this point, Luther writes: “One thing only...has been enjoined upon us to do all the days of our lives—to be baptized, that is, to be put to death and to live again through faith in Christ.”[vi] Traditionally, then, the Lutheran church among others has understood the celebration of baptism as a lifelong gift, and, thereby, a gift with everyday implications for our lives.[vii] Churches in the U.S. seem to have largely failed, however, in conveying this sense that baptism is much more than a religious ceremony to mark a

child's birth—and that death is much more than merely an end-of-life event, but is rather a continual companion on the pilgrim's path.

In the Christian funeral, the baptismal nature of the liturgy is traditionally marked from its opening, as the minister meets the dead and their family at the church entrance. After welcoming all the mourners now gathered into worship, the minister might offer words of thanksgiving for baptism, at the same time remembering the one who has died:

All who are baptized into Christ have put on Christ. In baptism, Name was clothed with Christ. In the day of Christ's coming, she/he shall be clothed with glory.[viii]

Well before this moment though, the baptismal pattern of death and life can be understood to shape the worship life of the church at every gathering. Church traditions in the U.S., such as the ELCA, offer additional orders for the affirmation of baptism and for confession and forgiveness as ways in which churches, within the scope of their Sunday services, might recall baptism's continuing role in the formation of Christian bodies.[ix] Yet, in many Lutheran churches, the order for the affirmation of baptism might only be used once a year to mark the confirmation of "adult" church members. On the other hand, the order for confession and forgiveness often has a more regular—and pronounced—place in Sunday worship (especially among Lutherans where corporate confession and forgiveness regularly begins the service of Holy Communion every Sunday[x]). Still, only the most trained eyes and ears in a congregation are likely to catch the nearly indistinguishable (and seldom explicitly named) allusions that the words of confession and forgiveness make to our own baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ.[xi]

Ultimately, without strong enough liturgical cues or other forms of Christian education to draw our attention to the baptismal patterns present throughout our lives, Christians cannot fairly be expected to think of baptism as a lifelong journey completed only by death. Likewise, seldom is the church reminded that the Christian scriptures do not exclusively situate Jesus' own baptism along the banks of the Jordan. Rather, the New Testament also poignantly speaks of Christ's baptism as that baptism realized ultimately in his trial, crucifixion and bodily death (Mark 10.38-39, Luke 12.50, Romans 6.3-4). Frequently overlooked as well, John the Baptizer prefigures Jesus' later words to his disciples by warning us that there is still one coming who will baptize us "with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matthew 3.11, Luke 3.16).[xii] Missing this means that we too narrowly understand the significance of our baptism into Christ, a baptism simultaneously already accomplished in our lives and yet still to be completed in the bodily death that inevitably awaits us. In this light, I think Christians should also look again to Jesus' words to Nicodemus, when he tells his night visitor: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and Spirit, one cannot enter the dominion of God" (John 3.5). Significantly, Jesus goes on to suggest that this baptizing Spirit or Holy Wind blows wherever it wills, even while we do not know its coming or going[xiii]—thus, leaving wide open the possibilities of just how the Spirit will make its dwelling-place within our lives. Though we are sent out from the sacrament of baptism "not knowing where we go," called to "ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown," this Spirit of baptism remains present to all those born anew still listening for it.[xiv] Outside this dynamic intra-scriptural dialogue, we are likely to forget what baptism of the Spirit means for our life journeys towards the triune God who waits within death in order to bring life out of it. Consequently, we are also prone to

underestimate the relevance of Christian baptism that continually and tangibly touches down on the rhythms of daily life—a life understood to be enlivened and transformed by its very proximity to death. Conversely, remembering baptism and cultivating awareness of the Spirit's presence in our lives, we too might proclaim Paul's bold witness to resurrection and the freedom given us through baptism when he says: "I die every day!" (1 Cor 15.31).

Living within death's reach

Putting death in the baptismal terms of everyday life does not deny that bodily death marks a dramatic and distinct transition in our lives. Rather, as embodied creatures, death undoubtedly changes the way we relate to those who have died and those still living. In the words of Long, all of creation is "bounded by mortality." [xv] Sometimes those bounds come as a gift, ending the unendurable pain and suffering of those we love. At other times, however, death comes into our lives as the "last enemy" yet undefeated by God (1 Corinthians 15.26), a totally unexpected and destructive force that leaves us like Jesus grieving with "prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears" that we or our loved ones might be spared death's cruel reach (Hebrews 5.7). Even so, in the face of such darkness, Christ urges us by his own example to live into the will of God and never deny whatever might come into our lives (Matthew 26.38-46, Mark 14.32-42, Luke 22.40-53). As it does for everyone else, death will drape itself around us. Acknowledging such inevitabilities, it seems we must all bear our own crosses if we are to follow the Christ who carries his, buried with him by baptism into death so that we too might rise to live and serve the dominion of God (Matthew 10.38-39, Mark 8.34-35, Luke 14.27, John 12.24-26). In the promise of baptism, we are freed to give our selves—in our daily encounters with death—to the Spirit-led movement of life that extends well beyond us. Our ability to

confront death in our everyday lives, to pick up and transform any death-wielding instrument used for violence or destruction in our world, has implications not only for how honestly we will prepare for our own deaths but also for how compassionately we will accompany others in theirs.

Denying our own death or the death of a beloved by averting our gaze puts us in danger of not looking up long enough to see the world as it is, or our proper place in it. Becker even relates the human bent towards narcissism—an absorption in the self that fills up the world to such a degree that there is little room for anything else—to a false immortality that we commonly imbue our daily routines with. Through such a distorted worldview, we are prone to live our lives as if we or those closest to us are somehow immune to death's reach. In other words, we move through our days as if we will not die. As Becker points out, this not only leaves us ill-equipped to deal with the death that will surely reach intimately into our own lives, but it also posits a false distance between "our world" and "the world out there," i.e., the world of our neighbor. Instead, we are left only with a vague sense of pity for those who live and die outside of the bounds of our relevant worlds.[xvi] Counter to this, we as Christians are called to the love of God, neighbor, and self, a love that implies coming to terms with the truth that death naturally frames our shared existence as mortal beings formed from the earth, human and nonhuman alike.[xvii]

As a baptized people, the church must importantly realize that we are not waiting unprepared for death, denying it, or planning our escape. Rather, we can live into the hope that we have already begun rehearsing for death today. Before the time of Constantine's imperial support for Christianity (with the Edict of Milan in 313 AD) and the rise of infant baptism, the *catechumenate* had developed among local churches as a process of teaching and faith formation for those preparing to

be baptized into the community. The later development of *catechisms* around the time of Protestant Reformation in Europe in many ways picked up on the echoes of this earlier call to educate all those young in faith—even if already baptized at this point.[xviii] Today, whether one is baptized as an infant or preparing for baptism as an adult, Lathrop points out that the central “symbols”[xix] of what can generally be considered the western Christian catechism are really a collection of liturgical texts that function in baptism but continue to be used in worship as “tools for continual reinsertion in baptismal faith.”

the Ten Commandments;

the creed;

the Lord’s Prayer;

Baptism;

Holy Communion;

confession and forgiveness/daily prayer/duties.[xx]

Keeping Luther in mind, Christian life itself might be defined as this “continual reinsertion in,” remembrance of and continual relearning of these baptismal symbols, especially as this liturgical “schooling” happens in the midst of people’s actual life circumstances.[xxi] Baptism calls all Christians to a kind of lifelong catechumenate of baptismal journeying in which we rehearse and embody our dead-but-raised selves, preparing both for the deaths we will die and for the lives we are living.

[i] Luther 1970: 190-191. Applicable to Luther’s use of the term here, Lathrop defines symbol generally as “a gathering place for communal encounter with larger meaning” or “a thing that enables participation in that to which it refers” (Lathrop 2006: 4). See also Lathrop 1993: 92 and 1999: 26-27.

[ii] Luther 1970: 180-181.

[iii] Ibid. 192.

[iv] Ibid. 190.

[v] Boulton 2008: 154.

[vi] Luther 1970: 193.

[vii] ELW 2006: 225, 275.

[viii] Based on Ibid. 280. In the chapter, "Planning the Funeral: Practical Matters," Long relies primarily on the ELW and *The Order of Christian Funerals* (1989), the currently-approved Roman Catholic rite in the U.S., but supplements this material with an Eastern Orthodox rite and other Protestant variants. For discussion of the funeral's gathering, see Long 2009: 154-156.

[ix] ELW 2006: 225.

[x] For example, see the suggested order of Holy Communion in Ibid. 94-96.

[xi] As an example of the oft-obscure baptismal language characterizing orders of Confession and Forgiveness, see Ibid. 94-96.

[xii] But see also Mark 1.8, John 1.33. For other baptismal-like language linking death and fiery trial to the descent of the Spirit of God, see 1 Peter 4.12-14. Complementary to our earlier discussion of the church as temple of God, John's baptismal premonition of the coming Spirit and fire is also sometimes interpreted as pointing to the Spirit's descent upon and indwelling among the ekklesia community after Jesus' death (see Acts 2.1-4).

[xiii] The same Greek word, *pneuma*, means both “spirit” and “wind” (see John 3.8).

[xiv] Quoting the words of one of the prayers suggested by ELW for use during the liturgy of Morning Prayer (2006: 304).

[xv] Long 2009: 40.

[xvi] Becker 1973: 2.

[xvii] Genesis 2.7, 9, 19.

[xviii] See Bushkofsky and Satterlee 2008: 82.

[xix] See n. 84 above for Lathrop’s definition of “symbol.”

[xx] Lathrop 1999: 141.

[xxi] Lathrop 2006: 15-16.

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