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From the early days of the Restoration Movement, Churches of Christ and Christian Churches distinguished themselves from their near neighbors on the American frontier with a noticeably robust ecclesiology, reflected in, among other things, the theology and practice of baptism. Alexander Campbell and Walter Scott's "high" view of baptism stood out in the context of the Second Great Awakening, wherein salvation often came to be connected to a subjective experience of the Holy Spirit that was externally manifest in ways other than baptism. For evangelists like Charles Finney, someone could respond by approaching the "anxious seat." All of this took place apart from water baptism. Campbell's association of believers' baptism with salvation was denigrated by most evangelicals as "baptismal regeneration" and seen as a regression to salvation by works. In the eyes of many evangelicals today, baptism "for the remission of sins" is still regarded as a false teaching that undermines justification by grace through faith.

Yet not everyone is scandalized by the high view of baptism. Many evangelicals, in fact, are warming up to the teaching, and, in many circles, evangelicals are beginning to say the same thing that Churches of Christ have said all along. This shift is due, in part, to a fresh reading of the New Testament. The efficacy of baptism—or, better, the efficacy of God's work in baptism—is perhaps the clearest ecclesiological doctrine in the New Testament. In addition to the New Testament evidence, there is renewed evangelical interest in patristic resources, and the early church provides unanimous testimony of the indispensability of baptism, summed up in the Nicene Symbol's acknowledgment of "one baptism for remission of sins." The emerging ecumenical consensus, moreover, has favored a similarly high view of baptism, reflected in *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, the Faith and Order report of the World Council of Churches (for quotations, see "Obiter Dicta" in this issue).

During this year of centennial celebration of Austin Graduate School of Theology (founded in 1917), as we are encouraged to look back and look ahead, it is appropriate to examine a topic that has been—and continues to remain—pivotal to the identity and unity of the Restoration Movement. For, despite all the diversity of faith and practice that now characterizes Churches of Christ, the important place of baptism is one of the few identity markers

that most congregations have maintained. For all the attention that has been devoted to the understanding of baptism, there is always more to learn as we seek to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord.

To these ends, we have devoted this issue of *Christian Studies* to the topic of baptism, asking contributors to answer questions such as: What is the sacrament of baptism? How should we think about baptism? How should we practice baptism? How can our theology and practice of baptism be improved? Much of the focus will be not only on what baptism means as a punctiliar moment in time, but also on its meaning as a linear event. Although our churches have been united around passages such as Acts 2:38, there has traditionally been less reflection or consensus regarding what should lead up to baptism and what should follow it. We pray that the reflections on baptism found in these pages will be beneficial to the readers and to the church and will bring glory to God.

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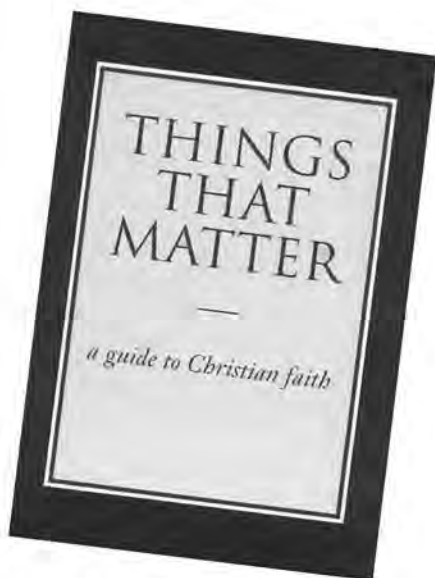
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Luther also battled doubt and dejection about himself as a sinner before God. It is said that in such moments he would take chalk and write I AM BAPTIZED on his desk. Luther has been quoted as saying that baptism is “a shield against all assaults of the scornful enemy, an answer to the sins that disturb the conscience, an antidote for the dread of death and judgment, and a comfort in every temptation.”

When reading Colossians 3:1–4, I thought about Luther’s exclamation, “I am baptized!” Luther’s bold affirmation is consistent with Paul’s message to the new Christians in Colossae. Paul urged them to continue living up to their conversion from a lifestyle that was entangled in the ways of the world to one immersed in Christ and his ways.

Luther, like Paul, understood that the transition of changing one’s allegiance from the ways of the world to the ways of Christ has its challenges. Christian conversion and living require divine gifts and resources. In this passage, Paul presents baptism as a gift of God that keeps on giving. But it is a gift that we should hold on to and contemplate often. In the same way, Luther appealed to baptism as a spiritual resource to sustain him and others in their efforts to be faithful to Christ on a daily basis.

A close reading of the first two chapters of Colossians reveals that a teacher or teachers had come into the church and were causing its members to question the reliability of their conversion and the validity of their experience in Christ. Paul gives several clues to the content being taught. It appears that the teachers believed that more than Christ and his work were necessary for them to be fully enlightened and assured of a secure place with God in heaven.

The seriousness of the matter is summed up in 2:18–19: “Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.” In the next three verses, Paul emphasizes that what one *believes* affects how one *behaves*. In other words, the *content* of one’s Christian faith does guide the quality of one’s Christian *conduct*. Thus, Paul insists that they will not be able to effectively practice their faith without a good understanding of Christ and trusting in him alone.

The opposing teachers' message seems also to claim that there were malicious powers in the celestial regions that worked to prevent Christians from reaching God. Paul wrote to assure the young Christians that they had been set free *from* those malicious powers that sought to enslave them. Paul, like them, knew the joy of being “rescued from the power of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (1:13). He reminded them that they “were once estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds,” but because of Jesus' work, and by following his way, Christians can be made “holy and blameless and irreproachable before [God]” (1:21).

Because of the deceptive teaching being promoted in the Colossian church, Paul stressed that Christians not only are set free *from* such malicious powers, but also are set free *for* a life with Christ that is morally pure. He is well aware that although Christians are set free *from* evil through God's grace and mercy, the power behind the old ways would still hang around and attempt to lure them back into sinful ways. Those ways are destructive and deadly. Faithful response to God's grace and mercy requires effort to live *for* Christ. This is not to imply that we in any way earn our salvation. It does mean that we must appreciate and carefully guard this gift.

So Paul reminded the Colossians of the truth that there are two ways to live life. One way of life focuses on Christ and consciously chooses to obey his will for us. The other way of life is concerned with the habits of the world and consciously chooses to disobey Christ. The point is succinctly made in 1:13–14: “[God] has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13–14).

Therefore, maintaining one's allegiance to Christ requires spiritual resources in order to sustain such a momentous decision and commitment. In our sermon text (3:1–4), it is interesting that Paul alludes to baptism before he gives the twin commands to “seek” and to “set their minds” on the things above. When Paul reminds the Colossians that they “have been raised with Christ” (3:1) he prompts them to remember the spiritual experience and to claim the spiritual resource that they received in baptism. It is, in fact, superior to anything that the opposing teaching offers.

Earlier, in 2:12, Paul used the same language of being “raised” to point them back to their baptism: “When you were buried with him in baptism,

you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised [Jesus] from the dead.” This is a very strong and positive statement about what God does for sinners in baptism. The very same power that God exerted to raise Jesus from the dead is applied to believers in baptism. Remembering their baptism would not only remind them of their new identity and status in Christ, but it would also be a resource for them to live up to their calling and commitment to Christ.

In 3:3, Paul affirms two facts about their new existence in Christ: they have *died* and they are now *hidden* with Christ in God. I read somewhere that the first-century Greeks would refer to someone who had died and was buried as being “hidden in the earth.” But Paul claims that baptized Christians have died and have been hidden with Christ in God. Once again, Christians who had been led to question their security in Christ are now encouraged to remember their baptism and claim the promises and security that they received there.

Death, burial, and resurrection are at the heart of the Christian gospel. Jesus was recognized as the Savior and proclaimed as the Lord because of his death, burial, and resurrection. Death, burial, and resurrection are important aspects of Christian conversion. Paul emphasizes all three in the four verses of our sermon text. This is the content of what they had heard and believed when the gospel was proclaimed in Colossae. As I mentioned earlier, content affects conduct; belief informs behavior. Understanding the implications of death, burial, and resurrection assist Christians in their practice of the faith.

As Paul says in 3:3, Christians have died and are hidden in Christ. However, in 3:4, he assures them that there is a day coming when Christ, who gives them life, will be revealed. It is not until then that Christians will also be revealed with him in glory. Jesus himself has triumphed over the malicious spiritual powers that oppose God and God’s people. Knowing this enables Christians to draw on the spiritual resources needed in order to be faithful in their practice of the faith.

There is a malicious power still at work that attempts to thwart God’s purposes on earth and especially in the church. And old earthly habits are hard to break. So the church has always been in a struggle against the work of those powers. As I’ve been emphasizing throughout this sermon, we as the

church have the spiritual resources to seek and set our minds on the things above if we will claim what God provides in Christ.

From 3:5 through 4:6, Paul focuses on examples of what conduct must be laid aside and what must be put on. Paul might take issue with the language of my earlier statement that old habits are hard to break. He uses an imperative in verse 5 that is very descriptive: “Put to death, therefore, whatever is earthly in you.” Paul would not say that we must break our old habits or sins. He insists that we must kill them.

I have a friend living with cancer. Surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy have been used in an effort to eradicate the cancer growing in his body. He has described the goal of the medical strategy as “murdering” the malignant cells. That is not far from what Paul is saying when he insists that Christians and the church put to death whatever is earthly in us.

Having established that Christians are now secure and hidden with Christ by virtue of having died, been buried, and raised with Christ in baptism, Paul turns to the ethical implications of their baptisms starting with 3:5. He lists vices and virtues in order to illustrate and practically apply those implications.

The ethical discussion is set in the context of relationships with all people (3:5–7), with the church (3:8–17 and 4:2–4), within families (3:18–21), those involving occupational and professional roles (3:22–4:1), and with society at large (4:5–6). Along with the affirmation of grace in 3:1–4 comes this word of judgment in the remainder of the chapter as emphasized in verse 6: “On account of these [sins] the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient.”

God’s wrath is not vindictive or impulsive, as some think. Wrath is built into and is the natural consequence of sin and the behaviors that arise from it. Paul elaborates more fully on God’s wrath in Romans 1. Three times in that chapter (verses 24, 26, and 28) Paul gives explicit descriptions of how God allows people to reap the bad consequences of behavior that is self-centered and disobedient to God’s way. Commenting on those verses, Tom Wright uses a memorable phrase: “Evil is what you get when the mind is twisted out of shape and the body goes along for the ride.”

Immoral behavior like that identified in Romans 1 and Colossians 3 is not consistent with the Christian life. With Paul, we need to understand that human life has been perverted from God's original intention for it. That is what he means when he urges Christians not to set their minds on the things of the earth in Colossians 3:2. Doing so naturally incurs wrath.

However, wrath is an aspect of God's love. We should not forget that Jesus' parable commonly called "The Prodigal Son" assures us that God's love is never withdrawn from his wayward children who choose to live in the far country. The prodigal son tasted the bitterness of the wrath that was the natural consequence of choosing to live outside his father's protective care and oversight. Even prodigals can return to the power of their baptism, once again renounce evil and sin, and be who they were called to be in baptism. Luther said, "Baptism is never useless unless you despair and refuse to return to its salvation. You may indeed wander away from the sign [of baptism] for a time, but the sign is not therefore useless."

In Colossians 3, Paul uses another strong and evocative word to describe the ethical expectations inherent in Christian conversion. In verses 9 and 10, he employs the image of stripping off the old self and being clothed with the new self. This is likely another allusion to baptism as practiced in the early church. At baptism, a person would strip off the clothes worn to the ceremony. Those clothes would be laid aside and not put on again. The act vividly illustrated that those clothes and the way of life lived in those clothes were no longer a part of the new Christian's identity. Emerging from the baptismal waters, the Christian was given a new set of clean, white clothes. Again, the symbolism is vivid. Just as the person had been washed clean of sin in the waters of baptism, the new clothes symbolized that a new way of life marked by purity had begun and would need to be maintained.

Some church traditions include renunciations of sin and evil along with the affirmation of faith when baptizing converts. Those presenting themselves for baptism are addressed by the one presiding at the baptismal ceremony with these words:

*I ask you to reject sin,
 profess your faith in Christ Jesus,
 and confess the faith of the church.*

Upon confession of faith in Christ, the one to be baptized is requested to make renunciations against evil and sin. He or she is asked:

*Do you renounce evil and its power in the world, which defy God's righteousness and love?*²

The baptismal candidate replies:

I renounce them.

A second question is asked:

Do you renounce the ways of sin that separate you from the love of God?

The baptismal candidate replies:

I renounce them.

A third question is asked:

Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and savior?

The baptismal candidate replies:

*I do.*²

Renunciation implies changing one's allegiance from the ways of the world to the ways of Christ, which has its challenges. Christian conversion and living faithfully requires divine gifts and resources. Baptism is a gift of God that keeps on giving. It is a gift that we should hold on to and contemplate often. That is why Luther knew to use baptism as a spiritual resource to sustain him and others in their efforts to be faithful to Christ on a daily basis.

Luther did not say, "I *was* baptized." He intentionally exclaimed "I *am* baptized!" His exclamation is consistent with the realities of baptism as described by Paul in Colossians. The blessings received and the responsibilities accepted at the time of baptism are not limited to that moment, but continue with the Christian all the way to death. Baptism was received in the past, but its purpose and meaning continue into the present and guide us into the future.

The benefits and blessings of baptism include forgiveness of sins, deliverance from evil and death, and the promise of eternal salvation. Baptism is not only a work of justification, but also the beginning of sanctification. We are

² Cf. BCW, opt 2, 1993 ed.

assured that our sins are washed away in the waters of baptism. Although the struggle with sin continues, we are assured that our Father forgives and through his Spirit empowers us to overcome. That is why Paul describes his proclamation as warning and teaching toward the goal of becoming mature in Christ (Col 1:28).

Remembering our baptism and often exclaiming, “I am baptized!” (even silently) can be a great help in times of temptation or victory, sorrow or joy, and at the time of our death. While writing this sermon I took a black permanent marker and a white 3x5 index card. Like Luther, I inscribed on it, I AM BAPTIZED! The card now sits beside my computer. It will be a regular reminder that with every breath I take I receive the benefits and blessings of my baptism. It is also a reminder that I made both vows and renunciations at the time of my baptism.

For those who are baptized, you might want to make your own visual reminder that will help you to remember your baptism and be thankful. For those who have not been baptized, you might want to explore further the meaning and blessings found in Christian baptism. What great blessing, comfort, and motivation come from the simple exclamation, “I am baptized!”

Allan J. McNicol

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