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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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Turning Point: Baptism as Rite of Passage

M. Todd Hall

Churches of Christ are known for many things in the broader Christian context of North America, but perhaps most prominent is our historical insistence on the important—even sacramental—role that baptism plays in the life of the believer. It is rightly seen as a turning point, as the place where a penitent sinner is met by a gracious God. This recognition of baptism as the moment of transition, along with a general insistence on withholding communion from the unbaptized, has allowed Churches of Christ to maintain something of a rite of passage in our life of faith. Ironically, though, our sacramental understanding of baptism can lead to aborted transformation insofar as it often leads to a “rush to the water.”¹ For this rite is meant to provide vital service to Christians—new and old—in that it serves as an historical, incarnate moment of transference of the believer from a previous life (of sin and separation) to a new one (of forgiveness and communion with God), and from the status of outsider to insider.² In this way, it performs both a sociological and pedagogical function. That is, baptism serves as a touchstone moment for believers in Churches of Christ, as an event that both embodies the faith and serves as a definitive moment in time on which believers may reflect as they live their lives of faith.

¹ Cf. Daniel Austin Napier, “A Sound Beginning: Retrieving an Ancient Model of Christian Conversion,” *Christian Studies* 26 (2013–2014): 47–63.

² Cf. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 279f.

Insofar as this is the case, it is vitally important for Churches of Christ not only to maintain the tradition of believers' baptism, but to further develop its practice in order to more effectively accomplish these purposes. In this essay I will expand on the sociological and pedagogical significance of baptism and argue for a more structured process in the way churches go about baptizing believers. In many cases, this will mean significant instruction in the tenets of the faith and training in the practice of the faith prior to baptism, which may (and perhaps should) lead to delay in performing the actual baptism of the believer. This delay will prove difficult given our understanding of the salvific role baptism plays in the life of the church. Thus I argue for the consideration of a third category in the conversion of a person, a state not unlike the concept of "liminality," made popular by Victor Turner, in which a convert is *between* the old and the new.³ In this category, seekers find themselves to be co-worshippers with the community, but not yet fully included, much like the catechumens of the ancient church (and perhaps the God-fearers of the synagogue). This liminal space provides an occasion for the church to engage in activities and relationships that are formative of Christian character and social behaviors in such a way that remain with the baptizand throughout the remainder of his life. In this way, we may take baptism even more seriously than we presently do.

The Sociological and Pedagogical Functions of Baptism

Baptism as Sociological Event. Social scientists have studied rituals and their significance to social development and cohesion for over a century. Much of this research has proven both insightful and helpful to church leaders interested in developing practices in which churches may engage in order to assist faithfulness and community among its members, despite some philosophical and methodological assumptions which are problematic. I want to suggest, here, that we read the findings of sociology through an incarnational lens. The condescension of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob into history and

³ See, for example, Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: De Gruyter, 1995), 94–130. The term liminality was originally used by Arnold van Gennep in his landmark sociological study, *Manuel du folklore français contemporain*, 7 vols. (Paris: Picard, 1858). Turner's work on rites of initiation and transformation built on van Gennep's foundation and greatly influenced academic thought, to this day.

created order, fully realized in Jesus Christ, allows us to see human activities and customs as means of communication from this God. What I mean is, God presumably spoke to Abraham in his native tongue (cf. Gen 12), just as he made covenant following patterns that would have been familiar to people in the Ancient Near East.⁴

A proper reading of social sciences for Christians, then, moves from theology to social theory rather than the other way around.⁵ That is to say, theology, and particularly the Bible, provides the framework for interpreting and appropriating modalities of thought from outside the church, such as philosophy and sociology. A chastened engagement with social science which recognizes and takes seriously its limitations provides rich fields for thought regarding the way the church may engage in community and personal development. It may also provide helpful guidance in considering how the church may most effectively engage in her teaching and rituals.

One of the developments within social science theory which may be fruitfully employed (if properly chastened) is the exploration of the function of

⁴ For an example of the God of Israel adopting covenant practices prevalent in the ANE, see Gen 15:12–21, especially v. 17, in which the Lord (in the form of a smoking fire brand) passes between the pieces of the sacrificial offering, thus making himself responsible for the keeping of the covenant. Cf. Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005) for a more detailed exploration of the presence of covenant material from the ANE in the Old Testament.

⁵ Cf. Peter J. Leithart, “Modernity and the ‘Merely Social’: Toward a Theological Account of Baptismal Regeneration,” *Pro Ecclesia* 9 no. 3 (2000): 319–330. Leithart offers an insightful critique of the wholesale adoption of the social sciences in theology (in this article focusing chiefly on the results of ritual theory). While Leithart sees some benefits of applying social science theory to the study of Christian rituals, he warns of the “questionable methodological and substantive cargo that may be smuggled in under cover of ‘science’” (p. 320). I am also aware of the magisterial critique of social sciences offered by John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006). Having heard these cautions, and I believe in keeping with Milbank and Leithart, I suggest that it is a fallacy that one must either accept or reject the methodologies and findings of social sciences wholesale. One of the fundamental strengths of Christianity since its founding is its ability to appropriate useful elements, terminology, and concepts from surrounding cultural thought without accepting all its premises and its methodological freight. One may thus, for instance, accept many findings of social theory without assenting to Darwinian theories of social development which run rife in social science departments in universities.

rites as formative events in the life of both communities and individuals. The field as developed has become known as ritual studies.⁶ Contra the dualistic understanding of the Cartesian “I” that so permeates contemporary, late-modern (and postmodern) philosophy and the social sciences, humans have proven again and again to be social creatures whose identities are formed within and through social roles and interactions.⁷ Thus rites of passage, serving as demarcations of social groupings, are vitally important actions that solidify one’s place in the community. They are powerful social moments that instantiate transformation and transition from outsider to insider rather than merely serving as symbols of a transition which has already occurred.⁸

In addition to solidifying community bonds, rites of passage also reinforce the community’s ethos in the newly initiated.⁹ As outsider moves to insider, participating in rites which he has previously only observed, he becomes fully responsible to the community for maintaining the community’s ethical and communal norms. This moment of transformation can be quite extreme, and is almost invariably accompanied by stable rituals surrounded by promises of fidelity (to the community and/or individuals). The need for and importance of this formality and ritual are especially true in sacred contexts, as the candidate moves from profane to holy. In these contexts, such as Christian ordination, baptism, and marriage, the transition is so radical that an intermediate stage is often required.¹⁰

⁶ In the field of ritual studies, see especially Ronald Grimes, *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Columbia, SC: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1990).

⁷ Christians, of course, should recognize this somewhat banal fact from the teachings of the Bible itself: from the beginning, humans have been social and socially formed creatures. For a purely sociological account of rituals and community, see, for example, Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, Rev. Ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009).

⁸ On baptism as instantiation of transformation and social transition, cf. Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2003), 102, 150–57.

⁹ Cf. Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 95.

¹⁰ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage: A Classical Study of Cultural Celebrations*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1960), 1–2. The need for a stable, ritualized moment of transformation is illustrated in a plethora of social transitions, whether in weddings or graduations or enlistment in the armed forces.

the ritual- and tradition-starved world of late modernity, to recognize the vital sociological role that the rite of baptism serves in the lives of their members. Baptism, as a community oriented ritual, provides a framework for resisting both the radical individualism and the de-sacralized world of our contemporary culture—a culture which Zygmunt Bauman has labeled “liquid modernity” for its lack of solidity and constant, disorienting change.¹⁴ Christians who experience Christian baptism as a solemn, sacred ritual have, as it were, an anchor driven into something solid which may then provide the strength and steadfastness to enact *lasting* transformation both individually and communally.¹⁵ If the church is to revitalize her mission to contemporary American society, she must reinvest her ritual practices with the “pomp and circumstance” historically central to sacred rites. This will provide stability in the shifting climate of “liquid modernity.”

The pedagogical function of baptism. In addition to its sociological function, baptism serves a pedagogical function as well. The typical mode of pedagogy in modernity is what Paulo Freire referred to as the “banking model,” that is, a system in which one who currently has knowledge transfers that knowledge into the students before him, divorced from practice and the students’ own knowledge and experience.¹⁶ In this epistemological environment, the mind has been considered disconnected from the body, that is, from human experience. Thus, education has focused on theoretical knowledge, and teaching has been reduced to lecturing or other classroom activities (seminars and the

mation (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 19–22. One could argue, I think successfully, that the liturgies currently holding the West together are those of the consumerist model of “late capitalism.” Insofar as these “rituals” are meant to form persons into individual consumers, one must recognize that they are not particularly suited to creating strong enough bonds to hold together a united populace, or to make lonely, disconnected persons feel welcomed into and a part of a broader community. These rituals, then, are antithetical to the Christian rites, which are meant to form believers into the *community* of God.

¹⁴ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012). Bauman has an enlightening discussion of the corrosive effects of consumerism on shared culture on pages 72ff.

¹⁵ Cf. M. Todd Hall, “*Oro, Ergo Sum: The Pedagogy of Spiritual Formation Among Protestant Seminarians in the United States—Toward a Post-Cartesian Framework*” (PhD diss., Texas State University, 2016), 109ff.

¹⁶ Cf. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Bloomsbury, 1970), chapter 2 especially.

like). What is often denied in this environment is any sense of embodied knowing, in which acts that occur in the body shape human knowledge and practice. This is problematic, however, insofar as embodied pedagogies—ways of instruction which involve both mind and body—educate and create knowledge in ways which theoretical education simply cannot.¹⁷ Humans are bodies, interacting with the world and experiencing it through these bodies, and thus acts/actions have a pedagogical significance far beyond that which modernity has assigned to them. As Robert Banks has suggested, “Truth must be embodied as well as articulated, incarnated as well as revealed.”¹⁸

Baptism is one such act which takes place in the body and implicitly educates the baptizand. Let us reflect, for a moment, on the way that the practice of immersion informs the believer both theologically and practically. First, baptism is an act of surrender. As the Lord’s Prayer begins with a confession of God’s sovereignty and providential care, so baptism is submission in trust to God’s extension of grace to the baptizand.¹⁹ As the believer is plunged beneath the inhospitable environment of water, she practices her confession, trusting that she will be drawn forth into new life. If she has been properly prepared for this embodied experience of surrender, she learns not only the theoretical concept of “offering herself to God,” she *practices* it. Baptism (and the Supper) are thus powerful moments, *thick* practices in the life of the believer which remain with her throughout her life.²⁰

Likewise, baptism is a rite of passage into a community, and not merely individual conversion. Though on occasion one learns of individuals baptized apart from the church, this should be greatly discouraged, for baptism is an act that instantiates the truth that the believer is now a part of God’s people. The people of God gather around the baptizand and engage in communion

¹⁷ Cf. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 40.

¹⁸ Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 172. Banks is discussing changes which are necessary for theological education, but his point of the importance of embodied education is applicable to church practice as well.

¹⁹ Incidentally, in this way, baptism is no more “works righteousness” than is faith/trust and confession. It is surrender, in trust, to God’s grace.

²⁰ I note again Smith’s discussion of “thick” liturgical practices in *Desiring the Kingdom*. Though baptism is a one-time event (and thus not the repetitive “thick practices” Smith discusses), it can (and should) be a formative event and perhaps the thickest practice of all.

elements were concealed under what scholars refer to as the ‘discipline of secrecy’ in the ancient church.²³

Indeed, in Churches of Christ the withholding of communion from the non-baptized performs much the same function: note that many congregations perform baptisms prior to the Lord’s Supper, so that the newly baptized may partake of the meal as a full member of the community.

Ancient Jewish practice provides analogs for this period of liminality as well, perhaps most clearly seen in betrothal, that is, the state between being single and being married. In this state, the couple was subject to the disciplines of marriage as if they were in fact married. Note that a husband- or wife-to-be would be guilty of adultery rather than fornication were they to engage in sexual relations with one who was not his or her betrothed.²⁴ If, in fact, the couple decided not to marry, a divorce was required (cf. Matt 1:18–19). Nevertheless, the betrothed were neither fully married nor fully single. They were not to engage in sexual intercourse and they did not participate fully in the other aspects of marital union. It was a period of preparation: not merely learning to be husband and wife, but practicing the discipline of betrothal prior to becoming fully included among the married of Jewish society.

An additional analog to this liminal state might be seen in the God-fearers of the New Testament. These were Gentile believers in the God of Israel who had not undergone the central rite of Judaism (circumcision) and who did not keep the dietary restrictions of the Jews. Nevertheless, the New Testament understands these to be at least co-travelers with the Jews of the synagogue, and there is evidence that they were a third category for the Jews as well.²⁵

²³ Napier, “A Sound beginning,” 55.

²⁴ Cf. Deut 22:13–21. The text specifically refers to means of determining virginity for a woman betrothed. It also provides punishment for those found guilty of losing virginity prior to marriage: execution. Given that capital punishment is not the penalty for premarital sex (Deut 22:29, Exod 22:15–16), Rabbinic interpreters of this text limited it to post-betrothal adultery. See Joshua Kulp, “‘Go Enjoy Your Acquisition’: Virginity Claims in Rabbinic Literature Reexamined,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 77 (2006): 36–37.

²⁵ See, especially, Luke 7:1–10, and the Jews pleading for the Centurion’s servant: “He is worthy to have you do this for him, for he loves our nation, and he is the one who built our synagogue” (v. 4). See also Acts 13:16, 26. I am aware that the traditional understanding of the place of God-fearers among the Jews of the first century

baptism should be ritualized—by that I mean should follow a formal liturgy through which all the members of Christ’s body pass. Those who would be baptized should pass through a period of liminality in which they are called to practice various disciplines under a mentor in their congregation—for example, daily Scripture reading and prayer, certainly sexual purity, and moments of fasting—*toward* baptism, so that baptism and especially the first Lord’s Supper following it are the great crescendo at the end of the process of conversion, and the great opening motif of the life of conversion to follow.

Adjusting baptismal practices in this way will have several implications for the regular workings of churches. Worship planners should be more intentional in developing services toward the end of encouraging transformation in the baptized. Congregations should have several services each year that reflect on baptism and its centrality to the Christian walk (not merely salvation). Perhaps baptisms could be scheduled for these services, so that they become crescendos in the annual life of the congregation.

In addition, churches will need to be more thoughtful in how they engage in the education of their members, and perhaps especially of the children of the church. A congregation that wishes to encourage the transformational power of baptism as rite of passage must consider ways that their education programs might lead toward preparation for the moment of decision and ultimately passing through baptism. I do not think it an overstatement to suggest that, while the church’s children have been sojourning with the church for many years, it is clear that in many churches their education in both knowledge and practice of the faith is lacking. Often, in fact, education in churches is disconnected from any particular *telos*. Understanding baptism as rite of passage lends focus and thus organization and even urgency to the education program of the church: we are leading our children toward this moment, and our education programs should be built accordingly. This recognition could in fact be an impetus for renewal in our congregations’ vision of education altogether.

Conclusion

Baptism is the church’s central rite of passage. If we are to allow it to function, incarnationally, as God’s investing human activity with his divine grace, we need to reflect more deeply on the roles that rites of passage play in

community and engage in practices that enhance its ability to perform that role. Admittedly this has great implications for the ways we practice baptism, and these are extremely challenging to our traditional insistence on baptism at the moment of belief. It also has implications for other Christian practices, such as the Lord's Supper and the education programs of the church (perhaps especially those for youth). But those who would be a part of the people of God should sojourn with them for a time, and their baptisms should be truly formative, touchstone moments for the rest of their lives. Anything less than this does not do justice to the role that baptism is meant to be for Christians.

Allan J. McNicol

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