

THE CHURCH AND BAPTISM: VOWS AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A teenager walking into coastal waters; an adult kneeling before the font; an infant cradled in the arms of the pastor; each is a baptismal scene. For many in our North American setting, each evokes sentiments of joy and peacefulness. Each is a setting filled with promise, filled with faith, hope, and love.

But baptism is not by nature so simple or sentimental. Yes, baptism bespeaks joy and peace. Yes, baptism bespeaks faith, hope, and love. Yes, baptism bespeaks promise, God's promise to us in Jesus Christ. But baptism also bespeaks a breach, a transformation, a responsibility, and a death. By means of the washing with water, a breach with the world is effected; a transformation to newness of life is begun; the responsibilities of faithful discipleship are assumed; and the Christ-united nature of one's life and death is depicted.

A Holy Partnership

Baptism is a spiritual event. It is God designed and God ordered. The spiritual work by means of a physical substance conveys a triple partnership. Each of the partners makes promises. Each of the partners assumes responsibility. Each of the partners accepts the cost.

The first partner is God. It is He who initiates the partnership, who offers the sacrament, who works in both the adherent and the Church. God makes promises in Jesus Christ and through His holy Word. He assumes to Himself the responsibility to "will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). God promises life in Jesus Christ, and God is faithful to accomplish all He has promised. And the cost to Him was the suffering and death of God the Son.

The second partner is the Church. To her God committed the responsibility to make disciples by means of baptism (Matthew 28:19,20). When the Church baptizes, she participates in what God has already begun. Rejecting sin, committing to Jesus Christ, affirming the Christian faith as contained in the Old and New Testament, the gathered congregation vows to God and to the one being baptized to live according to the Gospel and faithfully to discharge her responsibilities toward the new disciple. The Church commits to live according to the example of Christ and to surround the newly baptized with love and forgiveness, care and support, encouragement and prayer that he or she may grow in faith and be found faithful in their service.

The Church knows as she baptizes that to do so is costly. In simplest terms, the Church pays the expense of Christian nurture. The Church as a whole and each part gives of their time, talent, and resources that the new disciple may continue. The full measure of the cost means the Church and its members will sacrifice even life itself. When the Church baptizes, she disagrees with the world and snatches from its domain one whom the world would control and destroy. Against the world and in partnership with God, the Church is willing to pay the full price of bringing and nurturing persons in discipleship.

To western ears, this may sound noble but unduly dramatic. We do well to remind ourselves that, even as we live in a rather hospitable environment, such is not the case everywhere. In our own time, many have died being faithful to the Church's side of the baptismal partnership. But for us, few, if any, will be asked to give up life in one moment of decision. We lay down our life with each choice to serve unselfishly. We accept the embarrassment of knocking on doors for Christ, the inconvenience of visiting the sick, the risk of providing shelter for the homeless, the fatigue of another lesson to teach, and the pain of shared burdens and griefs. This we do knowing that our sufferings, modest as they are, are "filling up that which is lacking in Christ's afflictions." (Colossians 1:24)

The third participant in holy baptism is the adherent himself. To the newly baptized are made the promises of God and the Church. From him is expected the vows of baptism and their faithful fulfillment. Of parents who make these vows on behalf of their children, additional commitments are expected.

The Baptismal Vows

For United Methodists, the vows for baptism and for church membership are the same. "By one Spirit we are all baptized into one body" says the apostle (1 Corinthians 12:13). The vows made by those who can answer for themselves and by the parents of infants are these:

- ▶ To renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of the world, and repent of one's sin;
- ▶ To accept the freedom and power God gives to resist evil, injustice, and oppression;
- ▶ To confess Jesus Christ as Savior, put one's whole trust in His grace, and promise to serve Him as one's Lord;
- ▶ To remain a faithful member of Christ's holy church and serve as Christ's representative in the world;
- ▶ To be loyal to the United Methodist Church and do all in one's power to strengthen its ministries;
- ▶ To participate faithfully in its ministries by one's prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness;
- ▶ To receive and profess the Christian faith as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

The Parents of Infants

When taken by the parents of infants, these vows mean that they assume the great responsibility of nurturing, supporting, and encouraging their child in the Christian life. The parents live before the child a life that becomes the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They exercise care to bring him up in the Christian faith, to see that he learns the holy Scriptures, and that he gives reverent attendance upon the private and public worship of God. The goal, the prayer, and the discipline of the parents are their child's nurture in the faith that he may accept for himself the gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The Cost of Discipleship

Jesus paid the price of his life upon the cross that rebellious humanity might be baptized and made disciples. The Church enters into His sufferings by saying no to selfish desires and selfish preoccupations in order to baptize and to nurture persons as disciples. For the baptized there is also a cost, the cost of discipleship.

To be baptized is to live no longer to oneself, but to Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15). In baptism one becomes Christ's own possession (1 Peter 2:9). Baptism unites one with Christ's death and effects a breach with the world (Romans 6:3-5). It no longer claims our love nor our loyalties. The world's opinion is no longer motivating or formative. One has been raised in baptism to a new life, a life lived toward Christ and for

Christ. In baptism one receives death as a gift, death to the world and its power, death to sin and to judgement. One is given life, life in holiness, life in righteousness, life in fellowship with God in Christ, life eternal.

Whether kneeling at the font or wading in a lake or pond, baptism is a joyful act full of faith, hope, and love. But let us not misunderstand its simple beauty. Baptism is the awesome act of God that claims the life of the baptized. The gift of baptism is death and life with Jesus Christ. The cost of baptism is the cost of discipleship: pure, absolute, uncompromising obedience to Jesus Christ.

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