

CALLED TO AND DELIVERED THROUGH:
THE CHILDREN OF GOD IN THE SPIRIT-EMPOWERED WATERS OF BAPTISM

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DWS 704: The Sacred Actions and Ministries of Worship
April 20, 2013

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The culmination of this research and contextual application project depended on so many people giving graciously of their time, energy, expertise, and input. Thank you to all of the members of the “Pastor’s Study” at Alamo Heights United Methodist Church in San Antonio, Texas, for not only allowing this project to invade your classrooms and lives but also for shaping this project with your prayers and conversations. Thank you to Reverend Dr. David J. McNitzky, Reverend Michael Crocker, and Reverend Dinah Shelly for providing the opportunity, space, and encouragement this project needed to connect with our worshiping communities. Thank you to Reverend Dr. Reggie M. Kidd for providing the inspiration and direction for this project through thorough and inspired baptismal instruction. Finally, thank you to my wife, Stacy—whose patience knows no end and whose tireless proofreading keeps me in school.

We are, perhaps, just beginning to realize that our problem is not primarily liturgical, but social. The problem is with ourselves as a community of faith shared. Liturgical problems are mere symptoms of this more radical malaise.¹

— Aidan Kavanagh

INTRODUCTION

An overarching view of Christian worship can be described as the human response to an awareness of and familiarity with the redemptive cosmic story offered by the Creator through Jesus Christ and manifested in the relational presence of the Holy Spirit. Stated more simply, Christian worship represents any and all responses that rightly submit the kingdom of self to the Kingdom of God. However, the vast testimonial history of the faithful proclaims the loving presence and relationally active role that God initiates in the life of his children. God does not simply receive worship. God inhabits, engages and blesses both the worshiping community and the constituent worshiper. Worship is not just a response—it is also a righteous relationship.

Both the Scriptures and the history of Judeo-Christian faith and praxis indicate that the divine invitation to come to the water—both in spiritual cleansing and in engaging the symbolism of death and birth—has been a consistent part of that relationship. The ancient Hebraic practice of engaging God’s story through the ritual cleansing of *Mikvah* was expanded by the ministry of John the Baptizer, submitted to by Christ on earth, and subsequently given as a calling for disciples to baptize the nations. While the faithful have honored that inheritance and calling to baptize throughout history, they have simultaneously struggled with the expression and understanding of the worshipful response of baptism. Examination of baptismal history reveals a people who, at best have wrestled with varying theologies and practices of baptism, and at worst have used differing understandings of baptism to exclude, to kill, and to subdivide and separate

¹ Aidan Kavanagh, “Initiation: Baptism and Confirmation; Phenomenology of Christian Initiation” *Worship*. 1972. 46: (5 My) 264. [Article] AN: ATLA0000738120

the Body of Christ. In the modern, Protestant Church—a subdivision in and of itself partially due to baptismal understanding—thousands of denominations have been birthed and continue to isolate themselves based upon a perceived need to uphold doctrines of baptismal orthodoxy. The resulting ecclesial landscape is that of scattered and separate homogeneous faith communities—each certain its denominational understanding is the one correct understanding. The devolving result of this historical pursuit seems contradictory to a Savior who sought to unite and identify God’s people in the loving divine identity rather than create a singular theological apprehension. In his work, *Exclusion and Embrace*, theologian Miroslav Volf writes of this misconception.

The resurrected Christ, in whom Jews and Greeks are united through baptism, is not a spiritual refuge from pluralizing corporeality, a pure spiritual space into which only the undifferentiated sameness of a universal human essence is admitted. Rather, baptism into Christ creates a people as the differentiated body of Christ. Bodily inscribed differences are brought together, not removed. The body of Christ lives as a complex interplay of differentiated bodies—Jewish and gentile, female and male, slave and free—of those who have partaken in Christ’s self-sacrifice.²

Any progress toward the ecclesiology Volf describes will necessarily require both familiarity with the story of God and an understanding of the paths God’s people followed to their present state. Nevertheless, congregations of increasingly overburdened and busy worshipers who see the church simply as a place of momentary respite from the endless input and demands of their lives are being neither called nor equipped for such an embrace. Releasing the grasp on perceived safety through denominational and theological uniformity requires a faithful first step. The church must present the alternative reality—one that conveys the true rest of laying down notions of defining and defending orthodoxy. The church must point the way to the Kingdom reality in which life is found by contextualizing our lives among our brothers’ and sisters’ lives—though they may be different—all within the safety of God’s overarching story. It

² Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) 48.

is difficult to rest in one's identity as a daughter or son of the Father without first engaging the divine identity. Furthermore, the divine economy seems to yield the most comprehensive engagement of that identity in community. We wrestle with who God is and who we are called to be in response together.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Without baptism we are not 'brought safely through the water,' and the door into the ark remains closed to us.³

— Carla A. Waterman

It is no uncommon problem for a church to house worshipers who, having not yet grasped their identity as daughters and sons of God, are more comfortably entrenched around misperceptions of denominational orthodoxy than partnering in submission to and with God in the Kingdom. Many of the baptized faithful are disconnected from the deliverance and identity the LORD has provided. Though they have been "brought safely through the water," they do not perceive the open door and invitation into the ark. How can the church invite such worshipers into a journey of pursuing the identity and nature of God and thereby discovering their own identity and calling—their place in the ark? In *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship*, Reggie M. Kidd reminds his readers that understanding the path is not as important as beginning the journey.

Psalm 1 tells us that God simply does not care to satisfy the intellectual curiosity of coolly aloof inquirers: his passion is for dragging ugly wallflowers onto the dance floor. When we come to him looking merely for a respectable philosophical system, he not so subtly reshapes the question: 'So it's truth you think you want? Come sing in my choir, then we'll talk.'" In other words, learn to praise. Understanding will follow.⁴

In addition to being a topic of "intellectual curiosity" around which people have historically

³ Carla A. Waterman, *Songs of Ascent* (Wheaton, IL: WaterManuscripts LLP, 2009) Kindle Book.

⁴ Reggie M. Kidd, *With One Voice: Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2005), 49.

sought to build “respectable philosophical systems,” the calling of God’s people to the waters of baptism has also represented birth into new life. What better place to begin a journey of deconstructing perceived theological strongholds in order to discover our identity as children of God than with our birth? The waters of baptism release our true identity as we are birthed into the family of God and connected to the eternal story. We must invite worshipers to return anew to the water—to remember their baptisms and discover their intertwined identities among the people of God. As Dr. Kidd’s instruction invites us to consider, understanding the path will not precede our obedience in following it. The path, however, journeys toward a God who delights in and inhabits each step we take.

CONTEXTUAL DESCRIPTION

Toward the desired end of encouraging worshipers to journey communally toward greater apprehension of their identity of daughters and sons of God, this project will seek to provide a course exploring the biblical and historical foundations of baptism as well as pursue reflection and conversation on the honoring and contextual expression of baptism in the community of Alamo Heights United Methodist Church. The city of Alamo Heights is an affluent, family community of well-educated professionals located in the center of San Antonio, Texas. The United Methodist Church moved from downtown San Antonio to Alamo Heights in the early 1900’s and recently celebrated its centennial anniversary. Alamo Heights United Methodist Church is also the “mother-church” of several other San Antonio-area worshiping communities, supporting them with prayer, leadership, training, resources, and financial assistance. Although the church is predominantly Anglo and certainly has a strong base of life-long Methodists, its central location and size also make it a crossroads church for visitors from many other denominations.

The main campus of Alamo Heights United Methodist Church houses three distinct worshipping communities with a combined membership of over 6,000 people. Average weekly worship attendance in all services is slightly over 2,000. A pastoral staff of 9 and a support staff of approximately 30 people lead the main campus. The Senior Pastor, Dr. David J. McNitzky, is a graduate of Duke Divinity School and an ordained elder in the United Methodist Church with over 30 years experience—the last 20 of which have been at Alamo Heights. Under Dr. McNitzky’s servant-leader example, the faith community at Alamo Heights pursues freedom and encounters with the presence of the Lord, seeks to build and live within a culture of honor, serves the disenfranchised, and continually relies on its grafted connection to the Hebraic root of the faith.⁵

Throughout the year, Dr. McNitzky teaches the “Pastor’s Study”—a weekly teaching and discussion group offered every Sunday evening and Tuesday morning to any willing participants. While the “Pastor’s Study” frequently focuses on specific portions of Scripture or reviews specific theological and religious books, Dr. McNitzky has graciously allowed the class to study baptism together for four weeks beginning February 10, 2013. Both the Sunday evening and the Tuesday morning classes regularly contain around thirty people. The people range in age from 18 to 80 and have equally varied life and faith experiences. What all the class members do share is an interest in learning and growing by following Dr. McNitzky’s teaching and discussing their faith together.

A majority of the class members also have a shared experience of only ever belonging to the Methodist church. While the United Methodist Church positions itself as a people of “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.,” the commonality of seeing faith only as expressed in

⁵ For further information of the mission and culture of Alamo Heights United Methodist Church, see the “Love God, Love Others” outline in Appendix 1.

Methodism can lead to a homogeneous theological and doctrinal outlook.⁶ This is not to suggest that the theological and doctrinal outlook is incorrect as it is rightfully based on the scriptural and theological interpretations of John Wesley. Rather, that living in an insulated, affluent community and predominantly exploring the faith and praxis of United Methodism, it is very easy to want for the diversity, vibrancy, and depth of a wider experience. By and large, the people of Alamo Heights United Methodist Church—and specifically, the people who make up the “Pastor’s Study”—are a gracious and loving people who desire to learn from viewpoints and experiences other than their own. They are living proof of the accuracy of the “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors.” campaign.

Specific to the exploration of baptism, a majority of the class members personally experienced and support infant baptism as is typical in the Methodist tradition. In accordance with United Methodist doctrine, the church in Alamo Heights will baptize any willing unbaptized candidate—or infant candidate of willing parents—as long as they submit to an initial instructive appointment with a pastor. While the most common mode of baptism expressed in the church is that of an infant baptized via sprinkling in the midst of the worshiping community, baptisms most certainly occur for all ages and in varying modes and locations. In any baptism conducted by the pastors of Alamo Heights United Methodist Church, it is instructed and understood that baptism is a communal act in which the LORD intercedes to birth the candidate into new life through Jesus Christ, sealed by the Holy Spirit and strengthened by the Body of Christ.

⁶ “Open hearts. Open minds. Open doors: The People of The United Methodist Church” is the slogan of the most recent advertising initiative of the United Methodist Church. The website of that campaign can be viewed at <http://www.rethinkchurch.org>.

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Introduction

The overarching story presented in the Scriptures as well as the historical journey of the Judeo-Christian faithful reveal an intrinsic connection with the “wind-hovering-over-the-water creation” (John 3:5) as expressed in the engagement of baptism. The expression of baptism throughout history demonstrates the desire of the faithful to pursue and more clearly understand the identity of God while allowing that progressive apprehension to guide their attempts to honor God and each other in worshipful and communal response. While it is clear that the history of Christian worship contains misrapprehensions of God and misunderstandings of who God calls people to be, it is equally understood by the faithful that God has been and continues to be sovereign over the entirety of history—even the “mistakes.” The whole of Christian worship history belongs to God and therefore is capable of informing God’s people as they continue to seek and access the Kingdom of Heaven.

The understanding and development of baptism in faith and praxis serves as a lens through which it is possible to better analyze and understand the worshipful relationship and response of God’s people. By remembering and wrestling with both the biblical foundations and the history of baptism in Judeo-Christian worship, it should be possible to gain insight into who the faithful have understood God to be and how have they allowed their progressive apprehension of the divine identity to create and shape their relationships and responses of worship. Specifically, how has that progressive apprehension informed and shaped the practice and Sacrament of baptism in Christian worship?

This writing will attempt to briefly survey the biblical foundations of baptism and the history of baptism in Christian worship as well as analyze the rites of initiation, catechesis and

baptismal preparation as an attempt of the Christian faithful to honor God and each other in worshipful response. Among numerous articles and essays, the pursuit of this survey and analysis will innately include several water and baptism-related Scriptures as well as the biblical worship commentaries *Recalling the Hope of Glory* by Allen Ross, *Worship Old and New* and *Ancient-Future Worship* by Robert Webber, *Volume II of The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, *A Primer on Christian Worship* by William Dyrness, and *Walking Where Jesus Walked: Worship in Fourth Century Jerusalem* by Lester Ruth. Furthermore, valuable information will be garnered from James F. White's *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, Maxwell Johnson's *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*, and the video series *A History of Christian Worship: Ancient Ways, Future Paths*.

Divine Layering

Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him. John objected, "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not you!" But Jesus insisted. "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." So John did it. (Matt. 3:13-15 MSG)

When perceived as a whole, the Scriptures reveal repetitions of divine identity, the redemption of creation, and the calling upon the faithful. Commonalities of story and the consistency of God allow the divine layering of such thematic truths as love, grace and community to become apparent. Within many of the stories of Scripture are layers of images and meaning that reveal the birth, cleansing, redemption, death, and identity of God's people through Spirit-empowered waters. As the text of Matthew 3:13-15 indicates, the baptism of Christ was to be understood (at least) as the apex of the baptismal story—the culmination of all baptismal waters “coming together.”

Surely, the imagery of cleansing water that has both the power to bring life and death can

be found in numerous stories throughout the biblical texts. Likewise, the Scriptures attest to the delivering and identity-clarifying work of the Spirit. Nevertheless, there are those hyper-significant stories of the faith that portray the divine “wind-hovering-over-the-water” power that finds its completion in Christ’s baptism. Leading up to the baptism of Christ, the stories of Creation, the Flood, the Exodus, and the Crossing of the Jordan stand out as chronicles of divine intercession in and through water and the Spirit. Accordingly, any attempt to ascertain the meaning of Christ’s baptism and his subsequent calling to baptize the nations should seek to behold his baptism in the waters of the Jordan as the very culmination of story he proclaimed it to be.

Wind-Hovering-Over-The-Water

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. (Gen. 1:1-2 NRSV)

The ancient Israelite ritual of spiritual cleansing through the waters of *mikvah* highlights the connection the faithful have between ritual waters and the Creation. As Genesis describes the wind (or Spirit) of God bringing forth creation from the watery abyss, the rabbinical understanding of mikvah waters held them as “the womb of the world.”⁷ In her article “The Mikvah,” Rivkah Slonim describes the connection between the mikvah waters and the watery abyss of Genesis. “The world's natural bodies of water—its oceans, rivers, wells, and spring-fed lakes—are mikvahs in their most primal form. They contain waters of divine source and thus, tradition teaches, the power to purify. Created even before the earth took shape, these bodies of

⁷ Ron Mosley, “Squatting Immersion” *Mystical Mikveh Immersion* <http://www.essene.com/B'nai-Amen/MysticalImmersion.htm> (accessed February 14, 2013).

water offer a quintessential route to consecration.”⁸

Genesis 1:2 refers to the *ruach*—the Hebraic word for “wind” or “Spirit”—as moving, hovering, or sweeping over the abyss, bringing forth life from the waters. The symbolism of birth and the idea of the Spirit of God moving in and through the watery “womb of the world” carry through the Scriptures and are symbolized in the waters of Israelite mikvah and Christian baptism. This connection of baptismal imagery is further revealed in that God intercedes and takes action to move Creation from nothing to life—and from darkness to light. These initial images of water, Spirit, divine intercession, and movement toward life and light provide the God-Created foundation for subsequent scriptural layering.

Delivered Through The Deluge

Then God turned his attention to Noah and all the wild animals and farm animals with him on the ship. God caused the wind to blow and the floodwaters began to go down. The underground springs were shut off, the windows of Heaven closed and the rain quit. Inch by inch the water lowered. (Gen. 8:1-3 MSG)

Still within the stories of Genesis, one finds another significant story of God’s intercession into human history in and through water and the Spirit. The deliverance of Noah, his family, and the animals through the destroying deluge once again demonstrates the divine initiative to bring life from the waters by the Spirit. Genesis 8:1 indicates that the *ruach* caused the waters to recede to protect Noah and his family. However, as the LORD instructs Noah in the completion of the ark and provides for their deliverance from the flood that would certainly kill them, a new depth is added to the layered understanding—that of coming through the drowning waters by the provision and protection of God—an understanding about which Peter, the disciple

⁸ Rivkah Slonim, “The Mikvah” *Acts of Transformation*
http://www.chabad.org/theJewishWoman/article_cdo/aid/1541/jewish/The-Mikvah.htm (accessed February 14, 2013).

of Jesus, would later write.⁹

Another distinct development of this story-layer is the resulting creation of an identified “people of God” who are invited to partner with God in the new creation. The story of Noah and the deluge demonstrates that in delivering Noah and his family through and from the Spirit-empowered waters, God identifies them as God’s people—an identity that they will carry forth. “Then God spoke to Noah and his sons: “I’m setting up my covenant with you including your children who will come after you, along with everything alive around you—birds, farm animals, wild animals—that came out of the ship with you.” (Gen. 9:8-9 MSG) Marked as the faithful, God invites Noah and his family to participate in the new covenant and creation. “God blessed Noah and his sons: He said, “Prosper! Reproduce! Fill the Earth! Every living creature—birds, animals, fish—will fall under your spell and be afraid of you. You’re responsible for them.” (Gen. 9:1-2 MSG)

The layered story of Noah and the deluge not only affirmed once more that God—interceding by the Spirit—will bring forth life from the waters, but that in doing so, the people of God are delivered. Marking the people with waters that should have killed them, the LORD delivers them into a covenant of new relational life—a truth upon which the scriptural layers would build.

⁹ He went and proclaimed God’s salvation to earlier generations who ended up in the prison of judgment because they wouldn’t listen. You know, even though God waited patiently all the days that Noah built his ship, only a few were saved then, eight to be exact—saved from the water by the water. The waters of baptism do that for you, not by washing away dirt from your skin but by presenting you through Jesus’ resurrection before God with a clear conscience. Jesus has the last word on everything and everyone, from angels to armies. He’s standing right alongside God, and what he says goes. (1 Peter 3:19-22 MSG)

From Enslaving Death to Salvation Life

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and God, with a terrific east wind all night long, made the sea go back. He made the sea dry ground. The seawaters split. (Exod. 14:21 MSG)

While the stories of creation and the great deluge are extremely important, there is no more central story in Torah than that of the Exodus. In the Exodus, God hears the groaning cries of the Israelites under the oppressive weight of Pharaoh's rule in Egypt. God intercedes and, through a series of demonstrative plagues, shows both his power over the Egyptian gods and system to which the Israelites had submitted as well an embracing love for the suffering Israelites. The culmination of God's salvific action places the entire nation of Israel trapped at the edge of the Reed Sea with Pharaoh's army closing in. Although the Israelites surmise there is no way out and resign themselves to death and re-enslavement, the LORD instructs Moses to stretch out his arms over the waters of the Reed Sea. Exodus 14:21 indicates again that the *ruach* blew "all night long," separated the waters and allowed the Israelites to escape through the middle of the sea on dry land.

In the same way that the Spirit-wind moved in intercession to save Noah and his family from waters in which they should have drowned, the *ruach* holds back the waters that should kill the Israelites as they escape along the sea floor. The Israelites descend into depths that should destroy and instead are safely delivered through the waters by God. The people are even allowed to behold the intercessional presence of the LORD as they watch the pillar of fire hold Pharaoh's army while they are chased through the sea. As the fleeing people enter into the separated ocean, they are slaves on the run. Coming through the Spirit-empowered waters, they are invited to surface into a new identity, as the people of God—a truth Paul would later parallel to baptism in

Christ when writing to the Corinthians.¹⁰

As the children of Israel comes out of their baptismal waters into new identity, they too are invited into a grace-filled relationship with the Most High God. People who had shown little meritorious faith or love for this God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are called to the waters, delivered from the death of drowning, invited into a new identity as God’s people, and given an intercessor for their new relationship in Moses. God mercifully delivers those who have not earned deliverance. Through the watery abyss, the Spirit draws forth a new people and invites them into a relationship with a loving God rather than an oppressive king. The LORD then provides the time, space, and leadership for this new people-hood to grow. The newly baptized are invited to wrestle with the layers of God’s story and, with God’s direction and providence, co-write the next chapter.

***Chukkim* Obedience**

God said to Joshua, “This very day I will begin to make you great in the eyes of all Israel. They’ll see for themselves that I’m with you in the same way that I was with Moses. You will command the priests who are carrying the Chest of the Covenant: ‘When you come to the edge of the Jordan’s waters, stand there on the river bank.’ ” (Joshua 3:7-8 MSG)

In her article, “The Mikvah,” Rivkah Slonim explains how Hebraic understanding divides the 613 injunctions or laws of Torah into three categories. *Mishpatim* are laws that govern “the civil and moral fabric of life; they are logical, readily understood, and widely appreciated as pivotal to the foundation and maintenance of a healthy society.” *Eidut* laws and regulations pertain to “religious acts that remind Jews of historic moments in their history and serve as testament to cardinal beliefs of the Jewish faith, such as the observance of Sabbath, the

¹⁰ Remember our history, friends, and be warned. All our ancestors were led by the providential Cloud and taken miraculously through the Sea. They went through the waters, in a baptism like ours, as Moses led them from enslaving death to salvation life. (1 Cor. 10:1-2 MSG)

celebration of Passover, and the affixing of a *mezuzah* on the doorpost.” The final category—known as *chukkim*—are those laws that “completely defy human intellect and understanding.” Slonim calls *chukkim* laws “supra-rational” and states that they are “decrees about which the human mind can form no judgment.”¹¹ *Chukkim* observances are not done because they are understood; they are done because the LORD commands that they be done. In the case of *Chukkim*, obedience comes first; understanding comes second—if at all.

Following God’s instruction, Joshua tells the people he is to lead into promised land, “When the soles of the feet of the priests carrying the Chest of GOD, Master of all the earth, touch the Jordan’s water, the flow of water will be stopped—the water coming from upstream will pile up in a heap.” (Joshua 3:13) In spite of the clear story-connection that the Israelites would have made to crossing the Reed Sea, the obedience of the priests to step into the Jordan with the Ark and trust that the waters would stop flowing seems to point to a *chukkim* obedience. There was no understanding in the natural world that would explain why the waters of a river would stop on one side and allow the people to cross through on dry land. The only understanding that led to the faithful obedience of God’s instruction was in the connection to the layered story of God’s intercession on behalf of God’s people.

The priests and the people of Israel most likely did not completely understand what was happening or how it was happening, but when called to the water and invited to partner in God’s intercession, they obeyed. In doing so, the waters stop flowing, the people cross through the river on dry ground and into the Promised Land—a nation is founded. The identity of the people of God is affirmed yet again as they cross through the waters to which God calls them and from which God delivers them. *Chukkim* obedience at the Spirit-empowered waters led to affirmed

¹¹ Rivkah Slonim, “The Mikvah” *Acts of Transformation*.

identity as the people of God and new life in the Promised Land.

The Culmination of Story

The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God's Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him. And along with the Spirit, a voice: "This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life." (Matt. 3:16-17 MSG)

As the Gospel reader processes the stories of Jesus Christ being baptized in the River Jordan, it is imperative that the details of the account be placed (at least) within the hyper-significant stories of the Creation, the Deluge, the Exodus, and the Crossing of the Jordan. It is of no small significance that Jesus (*Yeshua*) comes to begin his earthly ministry by crossing through the baptismal waters to lead God's people to freedom through the same river that Joshua (*Yehoshua*) had crossed in bringing the Israelites into the Promised Land. Such layering reveals the divinely interwoven nature of the biblical narrative.

Christ's chukkim obedience to submit to baptism represented the beginning of new life for the people of God. God had come in flesh to teach, love, and save them. Christ's submission to baptism also portrayed the tying together and completion of the stories upon which their identity rested. Out of the "watery womb" of creation, redemption was born in and through Jesus Christ. Those same waters of birth allude to the deadly waters of the Deluge and the Exodus—through which the people are delivered, marked, and called forward. In crossing through the Jordan, Christ calls forth a people who have not earned God's intercessional mercy into a new creation. Jean Danielou writes of this symbolism in *The Bible and The Liturgy* as encapsulated in the descending dove of Christ's baptism.

And now we see the whole meaning of the figure: as the Holy Spirit, hovering over the primordial waters, brought forth from them the first creation, so the Holy Spirit, hovering over the waters of the Jordan, brought forth from them the second creation; and it is this second creation to which the baptized person is born in the waters consecrated by

the epiclesis. Thus the cosmic significance of Baptism is made clear.¹²

God-in-flesh crossed through the Spirit-empowered waters, was marked by the *ruach*, ushering in a new identity and existence in the Kingdom for those who would answer the call and come to the water.

Jesus Redefines a Jewish Ritual

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matt. 28:18-20 NRSV)

The practice of baptism in worshipful response and relationship to God did not begin with the earthly ministry of Jesus nor the ministry of his herald, John the Baptizer. In *Recalling the Hope of Glory*, Allen Ross indicates that the Jewish rite of baptism—self-immersing under the watch of witnesses as an act of cleansing and preparation—“was developed from the use of ritual baths in Israel.”¹³ Those ritual baths—known as *Mikvahs*—held such primacy in faith of the Israelites that the mikvah had to be constructed before the synagogue—a practice still observed in modern Judaism.¹⁴ Ritual, spiritual cleansing in a mikvah was an integral part of the Jewish faith into which Christ was born and raised. Rivkah Slonim writes of its singular importance stating, “The mikvah offers the individual, the community, and the nation of Israel

¹² Jean Danielou, S.J., *The Bible and the Liturgy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 73.

¹³ Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory: Biblical Worship From the Garden to the New Creation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2006), 419.

¹⁴ Ron Mosley, “Squatting Immersion” *Mystical Mikveh Immersion*.

the remarkable gift of purity and holiness. No other religious establishment, structure, or rite can affect the Jew in this way and, indeed, on such an essential level.”¹⁵

By submitting himself to John for baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus engages, claims and essentially redefines the Jewish religious ritual of mikvah. As Ross states of Jesus’ baptism, “There was no need of a baptism of repentance for him, but he had entered the human race to take the sin of the world on himself.”¹ Thus, the baptism of Christ is not to be seen as a typical engagement of the purity ritual as Christ had no need of purification. In *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, James F. White concurs. “Baptism had high authority in that the Lord himself had submitted to it at the beginning of his public ministry. All four gospels attest to this although not without some embarrassment (Matthew 3:15) since Jesus was sinless.”¹⁶

Although Jesus was not in need of repentant cleansing, the Gospel accounts clearly indicate the baptism of Jesus modeled submission to the Father and the beginning of his ministry. Instead of a repeated ritual of self-cleansing, Jesus’ engagement of baptism demonstrated to his followers an inductive and honoring act that initiated a journey toward new understanding and relationship in the lives of those who would follow him. Following Jesus’ ascension, baptism—for his followers—had come to symbolize their desire to die to the kingdom of self, proclaim identity with the death and resurrection of Christ and begin a new life in and for the Kingdom of God. Furthermore, as Christ’s command at the close of the Gospel of Matthew makes clear, his followers now understood baptism as part of their charge to introduce and welcome new disciples into that Kingdom.

¹⁵ Rivkah Slonim, “The Mikvah” *Acts of Transformation*.

¹⁶ James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 20-22.

Baptism in the Early Church

One hallmark of early second century Christians' efforts to express their understanding of who God was and who he was calling them to be was diversity. In *Part 2* of the video series *A History of Christian Worship: Ancient Ways, Future Paths*, Dr. Lester Ruth clarifies this reality stating, "We really shouldn't speak about worship of the 'Early Church'; we should speak about worship of the 'Early Churches'. What you're looking at in the first century is a rapidly expanding missionary movement—crossing a variety of people groups and geographic regions and cultures—and that's just a formula for diversity, not uniformity."¹⁷

The practice of baptism in "Early Churches" is evidence of diversity in early Christian worship. Scholar John D. Witvliet describes the beauty of baptismal diversity as evidenced in the discovered ruins of baptismal fonts of early churches.

There are early baptismal fonts that look like washbasins—and that makes sense as the waters of baptism, in part, convey meaning to us as a symbol of cleaning...some early church fonts look instead like tombs. They are cut out of the ground and that makes sense too if, in Scripture, we remember the powerful imagery of how baptism is for us a chance to identify with Christ's death and resurrection...There are even some Early Church fonts that resemble wombs...the texts associated with these fonts very clearly suggests the image of a womb—and that makes sense too. There are New Testament texts that speak about the waters of rebirth. So water for washing, for drowning and for birthing and fonts that correspond with each of these scriptural images—it's really remarkable to see the Early Church's imagination at work.¹⁸

It is not difficult to imagine the prevalence of such diversity in worship given the lack of liturgical unity or unifying authority present in the late first century and early second century.

One document written during that time—a treatise known as the *Didache* or *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*—seems to affirm Witvliet's description and gives insight into how early

¹⁷ Lester Ruth, quoted in "Part 2: The Body" of *A History of Christian Worship: Ancient Ways, Future Paths*, DVD, directed by Tom Dallis (Worcester, PA: Ensign Media, 2010).

¹⁸ John D. Witvliet, quoted in "Part 2: The Body" of *A History of Christian Worship: Ancient Ways, Future Paths*, DVD, directed by Tom Dallis (Worcester, PA: Ensign Media, 2010).

Christians were beginning to wrestle with concepts of faithful discipleship and worship practices.

“Chapter 7” of the *Didache* specifically addresses baptism.

And concerning baptism, baptize this way: Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. But if you have no living water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, do so in warm. But if you have neither, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and whoever else can; but you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before.¹⁹

The delineated options for water baptism within the *Didache* seem to indicate that, although the act and engagement of baptism as worship was vital, the method or mode of baptism was not of doctrinal importance to early Christian worshipers. Nevertheless, the whole of the *Didache* represents a beginning concern on the part of at least some early Christian worshipers to define and transmit ideals of faithful Christian worship praxis.

Following the Sacrament of baptism into the mid-second century also provides an increasing number of sources that testify to early baptismal practices. Chief among these sources are the writings of Justin Martyr. In the essay, “Worship in the Second and Third Centuries,” *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* concludes that the writings of Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* confirm the ideas established in the *Didache* and highlight the movement toward “pre-baptismal catechesis, fasting, and prayer before a threefold washing ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ . . .”²⁰ The development of a catechesis—or formal process of instruction on the basic Christian beliefs and the contents of the Scriptures—is also attested to by the late second century/early third century writings of Irenaeus.

¹⁹ Peter Kirby, “Early Christian Writings” *The Didache*, Roberts-Donaldson English Translation, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/didache-roberts.html> (accessed February 13, 2013).

²⁰ Robert Webber, ed. “Worship in the Second and Third Centuries” *The Complete Library of Christian Worship, Volume II, Twenty Centuries of Christian Worship* (Nashville: StarSong Publishing Group, 1994), 35.

Not only does Irenaeus refer here to the baptismal catechetical instruction with which he is familiar and which would eventually take shape in baptismal confessions of faith (creeds), but his whole work is, in *genre*, an expanded form of such instruction.

Irenaeus' treatments of baptism and Eucharist assemble and develop new traditional interpretations, particularly those of baptismal rebirth for the remission of sins and the gift of righteousness and incorruption.²¹

The *Didache*, the writings of Justin Martyr and Irenaeus as well as other second and third century sources like the *Apostolic Tradition* and the writings of Tertullian all testify to the growing concern of early Christians to both honor Christ through the practice of baptism and faithfully prepare and educate new members of the faith in the process of catechesis.

As the early Christian church developed, it garnered increasing persecutory attention from the hedonistic, polytheistic society in which it was embedded. This often violent and fatal persecution justified the growing scrutiny of the catechesis as a necessary step in protecting the faith. By the beginning of the third century, baptism had moved from its roots as a Jewish ritual through diverse expressions of beginning new life and was developing into a prolonged rite of initiation within the faith community. Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem's *Procatechesis*—along with the *Mystagogical Catecheses*—was delivered to candidates training for baptism reveals the urgency and importance of preparing people to defend the faith.

Abide thou in the Catechizings: though our discourse be long, let not thy mind be wearied out. For thou art receiving thine armour against the antagonist power; against heresies, against Jews, and Samaritans, and Gentiles. Thou hast many enemies; take to thee many darts; thou hast many to hurl them at. And thou hast need to learn how to hurl them at the Greek; how to do battle against heretic, against Jew and Samaritan. The armour indeed is ready, and most ready is the sword of the Spirit; but thou also must stretch forth thy hands with good resolve, that thou mayest war the Lord's warfare, mayest overcome the powers that oppose thee, mayest escape defeat from every heretical attempt.²²

²¹ Ibid., 36.

²² St. Cyril of Jerusalem, "Procatechesis and Mystagogical Catecheses" *Lectures on the Christian Sacraments*, F.L. Cross, ed. (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1951), 46.

More and more, sentiments like those expressed by Cyril drove the catechism to become a lengthy process in an effort to both ascertain the commitment of individual candidates as well as develop their knowledge of and readiness to defend the faith. That development would continue in the fourth, fifth, and sixth centuries.

Baptism in the Later Patristic Church

The fourth century represented a time of great change in Christian worship. This change was largely due to the appropriation of Christianity under the rule of the Roman Emperor Constantine. While the authenticity of Constantine's embrace of his mother Helena's Christian faith is a subject of debate, Constantine's support of the faith was nonetheless enough to pull Christianity out of the shadows. With the Edict of Milan in 313 and Council of Nicaea in 325, Constantine established Christianity as the religion of the Roman Empire. No longer the persecuted community of Christ-followers, Christian worship practices now inherited a new responsibility: to preserve the faith and educate the faithful in the face of an overwhelming influx of new believers. Under the pressure of this massive religious migration, the catechesis developed into an even lengthier and more demanding process of leading and training candidates for baptism. John Witvliet details the growing demands of this process in *A History of Christian Worship: Ancient Ways, Future Paths*.

For most Christians today, what would strike them about this practice is just how rigorous it seems to be. Christians would participate in a group known as the catechumenate—a catechism class. The season of Lent was a particularly intense time of preparation for baptism. Strong moral codes were imposed on these new Christians. Mentors would be asked to vouch for their commitment to the Gospel and their willingness to live as disciples of Jesus. They would be taught the Scriptures and the Apostles Creed. The whole constellation of practices that are part of the Christian life; prayer, moral faithfulness, worship, learning and witness to new Christians came together in this process.²³

²³ John D. Witvliet, quoted in "Part 2: The Body" of *A History of Christian Worship*.

Following this often multi-year process of the catechumenate, candidates in many regions spent the season of Lent (the 40 days leading up to paschal) in devout prayer, fasting and repentance. The culmination of their preparatory efforts was baptism on the day of Easter. In spite of the lengthening process and catechumenate requirements, Witvliet points out that the celebration of baptism in Later Patristic churches still maintained focus on transition through Christ to new identity and new life; “There was a profound change in identity that was celebrated on those Easter baptism services.”⁹

In addition to attesting to the increasing weight of the catechesis, liturgical evidence from this time period also begins to point to differing practices in the Eastern and Western Churches. Specific to the developing Eastern church, the *Apostolic Constitutions*—a collection of eight treatises believed to have originated in Antioch toward the end of the fourth century—contained directions and prayers related to baptism. Lloyd G. Patterson’s encyclopedic entry “Worship During the Fourth and Fifth Centuries” indicates that the *Apostolic Constitutions* called for “a unified taking of the confession of faith separate from the washing itself and a subsequent Episcopal anointing with the invocation of the Spirit.”²⁴

Liturgical evidence of the catechetical process in the Western Church exists in the aforementioned transcribed addresses of Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem as well as those given by Archbishop Ambrose of Milan. These teachings—given to the catechumens both before and after baptism—contain instruction on the expectations of life in the Christian church and were held as equally integral to all other parts of the catechesis. In his book *Walking Where Jesus*

²⁴ Lloyd G. Patterson, “Worship During the Fourth and Fifth Centuries” *The Complete Library of Christian Worship, Volume II*, Robert Webber, ed. (Nashville: StarSong Publishing Group, 1994), 38.

Walked: Worship in Fourth Century Jerusalem, Dr. Lester Ruth describes this instruction as recorded in the Jerusalem pilgrimage diary of Egeria—a nun from the western part of Europe.

According to Egeria, Cyril went through the entire story of the Bible, starting with Genesis, and then followed up with a thorough teaching on the Creed as a summary of scriptural faith so that the newly baptized would be able to follow the Scriptures whenever they were read in worship. Thus, one of the bishop's most important liturgical ministries was to immerse baptismal neophytes in the scriptural story so that they could participate well in worship.²⁵

The growing complexity of the catechesis process—as well as other Christian worship practices—encouraged a movement away from the oral tradition from which Christianity had sprung. The influx of new faithful met with the processes the churches deemed necessary to maintain orthodoxy and the potential for division through varying understandings of orthodoxy began. As Patterson indicates regarding the movement away from oral tradition in *Volume II* of *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, “whenever and by what stages it occurred, different notions of the nature of Christian liturgical gatherings began to make their influence felt.”²⁶ These different notions would continue to influence the practice and Sacrament of baptism as time progressed.

The Orthodoxy of Age

During the Later Patristic period, concerns over orthodox doctrine and praxis arose regarding the appropriate age for baptism. Debate and divergent understanding would follow the faithful through the Byzantine and Medieval period as varying contentions and liturgical responses regarding the appropriate age for baptism spread in both the Eastern and Western Churches. At the heart of each understanding was a desire to correctly define what was truly

²⁵ Lester Ruth, Carrie Steenwyk, and John D. Witvliet, *Walking Where Jesus Walked: Worship in Fourth Century Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2010), 25.

²⁶ Patterson, “Worship During the Fourth and Fifth Centuries” *The Complete Library of Christian Worship, Volume II*, 42.

happening—or at least what was supposed to happen—in baptism. Questions of whether or not infants were capable of participating in the rite of baptism inevitably came down to differing understandings of what was required of humans in the Sacrament itself.

In the middle ages, church leaders like Thomas Aquinas—in their efforts to discern the true nature of baptism—were subjecting the understanding of baptism to what Robert Webber labels a “significant shift.”

Thomas Aquinas interpreted baptism in terms of baptismal regeneration. Aquinas understood baptism and all the sacraments to be ‘remedies through which the benefit of Christ’s death could somehow be conjoined to them’. For him, the human condition is of such a nature that ‘spiritual remedies had to be given to men under sensible sign.’ Consequently, baptism, as Aquinas claimed, has ‘the power to take away both original sin and all the actual committed sins.’²⁷

As Webber indicates, the doctrine of *Ex opere operato*, or *it works the work*, signifies a major turn in the practice of baptism. Whereas baptism in earlier centuries was expressed within a vibrant ministry of receiving the Word and being trained as a disciple, the water of baptism became isolated—administered almost exclusively to infants—generating a shift in sacramental understanding. The original emphasis of a Sacrament that birthed believers into new life morphed into an understanding that the water of baptism itself brought salvation to the baptized. The Catholic Church eventually ratified this understanding of baptism in 1545 at the Council of Trent. Today, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* still attests to such theology tracing the following instruction back to the Council of Trent.

Born with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin, children also have need of the new birth in Baptism to be freed from the power of darkness and brought into the realm of the freedom of the children of God, to which all men are called. The sheer gratuitousness of the grace of salvation is particularly manifest in infant baptism. The

²⁷ Robert E. Webber, *Worship Old and New*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 232.

Church and the parents would deny a child the priceless grace of becoming a child of God were they not to confer Baptism shortly after birth.²⁸

In spite of any perceived deficiencies of the *Ex opere operato* theology, it is clear that the Catholic Church has understood and continues to understand baptism today as the birth of a new identity and calling as a child of God.

Protestants & Baptism

During the Protestant Reformation, varied apprehensions of orthodox liturgy played an extremely significant role in what would eventually become the vast splintering of the Christian church. Amid extreme examples of church corruption and an increasingly detached worshipping community, the rejection of the *Ex opere operato* theology by religious leaders Martin Luther and John Calvin paved a way for even further redefinition of “correct” baptismal practices.

Martin Luther accepted the practice of infant baptism on the basis of its outward and visible dimension God’s promise to God’s people and the belief of inward and unseen divine action of the Sacrament. Following the Pauline theology presented in Colossians 2:11-13, baptism was tied to the covenant of circumcision (which included infants) and invited God’s people to enjoy the salvific relationship God provides. Luther and Calvin both believed that the invitation to God’s grace had always included children and reasoned the practice and Sacrament of baptism should honor that inclusion.

Although the beginning of the Reformation—as represented in the leadership of Luther and Calvin—carried an acceptance of infant baptism as a symbol of the inclusion of children into the Body of Christ and a commitment to the raising of children in faith, the Anabaptists countered the practice in the sixteenth century on the basis that the Scriptures simply did not

²⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church with Modifications from the Editio Typica* (New York, New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc. 1995), 350.

support it. Anabaptists perceived baptism as a sign of human action and not of divine action.

Robert Webber summarizes the inciting nature of the Anabaptist response to infant baptism.

In short, Anabaptist theology viewed baptism as a personal act of faith rather than God's sign of grace. In the sixteenth century, immersion of an adult signified renunciation of the false doctrine of the Catholic Church. It was also an entrance into and an embracing of the life of the new community of God. . . The Anabaptists argued that because no record of infant baptism could be found in the New Testament, the baptism of infants was always wrong.²⁹

In "Anabaptist Worship," James F. White affirms the severity of the doctrinal conflict stating, "Both Protestants and Catholics vied with each other to persecute Anabaptists, or "rebaptizers" as they came to be known, because of their refusal to accept their own baptisms as infants."³⁰

The conflicts over infant baptism during the Protestant Reformation represented the continued struggle to properly define and protect orthodox liturgical practice. The Reformation—by dissenting from the Catholic orthodoxy—allowed for the illumination and development of differing understandings and approaches to liturgical practices, including baptism. Some of those differing understandings struggled—just as the forebears of the faith had struggled—with correctly understanding what actually took place in baptism. In 1756, John Wesley's *A Treatise on Baptism* sought to answer such a question and concluded that it was the "bounden duty" of the Church to "consecrate our children to God" in baptism as the Jewish forebears of the faith had understood circumcision.

It is the initiatory sacrament, which enters us into covenant with God. It was instituted by Christ, who alone has power to institute a proper sacrament, a sign, seal, pledge, and means of grace, perpetually obligatory on all Christians. We know not, indeed, the exact time of its institution; but we know it was long before our Lord's ascension. And it was instituted in the room of circumcision. For, as that was a sign and seal of God's covenant, so is this.

²⁹ Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 233.

³⁰ James F. White, "Anabaptist Worship" *The Complete Library of Christian Worship, Volume II*, Robert Webber, ed. (Nashville: StarSong Publishing Group, 1994), 78.

The infants of believers, the true children of faithful Abraham always were under the gospel covenant. They were included in it, they had a right to it and to the seal of it; as an infant heir has a right to his estate, though he cannot yet have actual possession.³¹

By the mid-nineteenth century, the notion of baptism as a saving act had found even more support in the American frontier movements of Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell. The Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement furthered the belief that a believer's baptism by immersion was necessary for salvation. In his article, "Infant Baptism and the Boundaries of Christian Fellowship," Ralph K. Hawkins explains that for Campbell—the "seminal figure" of the movement—the rejection of infant baptism in favor of believer's immersion was a culminate response to wrestling with his own infant baptism and the "Mourner's Bench" theology of the Nineteenth Century.³²

The theology of mourner's bench posited that those seeking full membership in the church should be able to offer a testimonial narrative of their salvation. The subjective nature of such a standard left Campbell—and many others—wanting for more objective proof of conversion.

Campbell's baptismal theology developed, at least to some degree, as a reaction to this mourner's bench theology of conversion in the frontier churches. Campbell saw baptism as a way for the believers to be assured of their salvation. . . For Campbell, baptism can be understood as the point at which sin is remitted and penitent sinners come into right standing with God. The rapid growth of Campbell's movement among frontier Protestants during the 1820s and 1830s can be explained, at least in part, by this message of comfort to troubled and insecure believers.³³

³¹ John Wesley, *A Treatise on Baptism: 1756*
<http://personalpages.tds.net/~amiddlek/Theology/Treatise%20on%20Baptism.htm> (accessed March 1, 2013).

³² Ralph K. Hawkins, "Infant Baptism and the Boundaries of Christian Fellowship" *Stone-Campbell Journal*. 2002. 5: (1 Spr) 52-53. [Article] AN: ATLA0001456269

³³ *Ibid.*, 54.

A History of Christian Worship: Ancient Ways, Future Paths explains how the theological ideas of the Restoration movement furthered the understanding of baptism as necessary for salvation and birthed several new Protestant traditions accordingly.

The movement placed an emphasis on baptismal regeneration, which refers to adult baptism by immersion as a means to gain salvation. The restoration movement produced several Christian communities such as the Churches of Christ and the Christian church Disciples of Christ. Other groups such as Baptists rejected baptism as a means of salvation but embraced immersion. These groups likewise benefitted from the renewed emphasis on baptism.³⁴

Baptism as a rite and practice through the Post-Reformation Era and into the twentieth century continued to diverge amidst a proliferation of worship traditions—all seeking to restore orthodoxy to their faith and praxis at the level of their apprehension. In spite of varying modes and understandings of baptism, there still existed a commonality of employing the ritual of using water to identify believers as entering a new life aligned with Jesus Christ.

Baptism Moves Forward

Throughout all the liturgical movements and changes of the last two thousand years, the Christian church—in its diverse and fragmented state—has maintained the need of the believer to follow the example of Christ and engage the Sacrament of baptism. Modern studies into past liturgical practices have generated new interest in grasping and integrating the diverse expressions and understandings of baptism within the history of the Christian faith. Ancient practices are being reintegrated into modern expressions of baptism. Robert Webber gives an example of this modern reality in *Worship Old and New*.

In the early church baptism was highlighted by the renunciation of evil and by the threefold acceptance of the Father, Son, and Spirit, as expressed in the interrogatory creed (later developed into the Apostles' Creed). Today the new baptismal liturgies of the

³⁴ *A History of Christian Worship: Ancient Ways, Future Paths* “Part 2: The Body” DVD, directed by Tom Dallis (Worcester, PA: Ensign Media, 2010).

Roman Catholic Church and of the Protestant mainline churches reflect this ancient structure.³⁵

Followers of Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century have access to an overwhelming amount of liturgical information. No other era in history has possessed the wealth of historical resources and cultural understandings of the Christian faith and praxis. Rather than reacting to a progressive apprehension of this information by drawing lines of separation and embracing a philosophy of negation, the Christian faith has an opportunity to wrestle with the uncomfortable and beautiful freedom of liturgical diversity. Perhaps it has always possessed such freedom. Instead of being threatened by the absence of a unified and single code of faith and practice, it is hopeful that the Christian faith can agree, as William Dryness writes, “that certain practices—such as prayer, Scripture-reading, praise, and baptism—are essential markers of God’s presence and our faithful human response.”³⁶ There is freedom—liturgical and otherwise—in recognizing that God is sovereign and that the inherent diversity of worship expressed by God’s infinite creation has never and will never threaten the Kingdom.

Regaining the Importance of New Life: The Model of Baptismal Preparation and Progression

The scriptural example of the baptism of Jesus Christ does not specifically reference a time of preparation prior to his baptism. Nevertheless, it is readily apparent that Jesus did not hastily enter into his own baptism. Jesus was, at the very least, an adult male who had memorized the Torah—as any Hebrew male purporting to be a rabbi would do. After approximately thirty years on earth, the baptism of Jesus serves as the beginning of his ministry—the birth of a new expression of the Creator’s intercession into human history. While

³⁵ Webber, *Worship Old and New*, 235.

³⁶ William A. Dryness, *A Primer on Christian Worship: Where We’ve Been, Where We Are, Where We Can Go* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 47.

there is certainly scriptural and historical evidence to support the practice of spontaneous baptism or baptisms without preparation, early Christian documents and traditions seem to assert that baptism was understood as a beginning—a new life—for which preparations could be made and from which development and growth should occur.

The *Didache*—possibly dating back to the late first century—provides an example of a deliberate attempt to prepare candidates for the worship practice of baptism. “But before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and whoever else can; but you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before.”³⁷ *Volume II of The Complete Library of Christian Worship* confirms this early testimony, as well as Justin Martyr’s *First Apology* and the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, as indicative of the presence of a pre-baptismal period of preparation or catechesis. “As a second-century document, *Didache* follows an outline roughly similar to that found in Justin and Hippolytus, in which a pre-baptismal catechesis precedes a description of paschal baptism and Eucharist, and is followed by reference to the Sunday Eucharist and other matters.”³⁸ It is clear that early Christian efforts to rightly engage the practice of baptism understood it not as a single and ceasing moment in time but as the beginning of new life—a life to honor with both preparation and progression.

In an attempt to rightly discern who they would be in relationship and worshipful response to their Creator, early Christians affirmed the example given them by their Savior and the founders of the Christian faith. Baptism represented the beginning of a new life—a life lived in the Kingdom of God. Such a new life deserved preparation, training, prayer and reflection—not only to provide a clearer context for relationship to God but also to provide a clearer context

³⁷ Peter Kirby, “Early Christian Writings” *The Didache*.

³⁸ Webber, ed. “Worship in the Second and Third Centuries” *The Complete Library of Christian Worship, Volume II*, 35.

for relationship to God's people. For the often-persecuted early Christians, whose gatherings were protectively shrouded out of necessity, baptismal preparation and progression fostered Christian community by educating baptism candidates as to the true extent and meaning of Christian practices.

As previously discussed, the Later Patristic period saw even more attention brought to this already significant process of baptismal instruction. Much of this increased emphasis arose during the fourth century from a need to protect the faith and prepare the faithful, given the substantial migration to Christianity brought about by Constantine's embrace of the Christian faith. Although some scholars lament the power shift that vaulted Christianity into state religion as the beginning of the loss of purity or orthodoxy in the Christian faith, any dilution caused by the conversion of Constantine and the Christianization of the Roman Empire does not negate the attempts of the faithful to honor their relationship to the Creator and each other as they ushered new believers into the Kingdom of God.

Within the varying expressions of baptismal preparation and initiation present in the first three centuries of the Christian faith, consistent ideals seem to emerge. Regardless of whether the intention of baptismal instruction was to dispel rumors and train converts to live faithfully, as it was in the first and second centuries, or to solidify commitment and indoctrinate new converts as is seen in the third century, all efforts seem to point to the idea that baptism represents a transition into something new. By fasting, qualifying, teaching, and training, early Christians continually maintained a theology of baptism as a birth through Christ into a new life in the Kingdom of God anointed by the Holy Spirit.

James White explains five significant baptismal metaphors understood by early Christians in his book *A Brief History of Christian Worship*. According to White, the early

churches held baptism as bringing “union to Christ.” Secondly, in this union, Christ incorporates the baptized “into his body the church.” White asserts that baptism was also understood to provide both “the forgiveness of sins” and “the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Last, the initiation of baptism was clearly “imaged as a new birth.” White concludes, “So here we come full circle; baptism is both death and resurrection and new birth. The waters of baptism are both tomb and womb.”³⁹

White goes on to point out that the Early Church was able to hold all of these metaphorical understandings of baptism in tension—a capability that the Christian faith has lost over time as different traditions emphasized one understanding and abandoned the rest. While this sad reality is no doubt true, the greater questions of whether the Church maintains any consistent understanding of baptism should be asked. Has the church been faithful to theological truths represented in baptismal instruction? Are the faithful continuing to qualify, educate, and train the baptized toward a new life unified by Christ as the people of God in the Kingdom? Are current baptismal practices—preparatory and developmental—contributing to a larger theology of worship that provides at least a basic context for answering the questions, “Who is God?” and “Who is God calling us to be in response?”

The provision of a faithful, communal arena for wrestling with these questions is precisely what the baptismal instruction practices of the Early and Later Patristic churches sought to accomplish. While a perfect faith and praxis could not be achieved in the processes of initiation, catechism, and baptism (in spite of their collective duration), these rites of preparation nonetheless served to activate and frame the conversation. Primarily, the theology behind the instruction, prayer and fasting of the rites of initiation, catechesis, and baptism is that the LORD

³⁹ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 20-22.

has interceded and continues to intercede into human history for our redemptive benefit. Through Jesus Christ, God invites humanity into relationship and response by aligning with God's redemptive works. Through the Holy Spirit, God empowers and equips the faithful to live in and build in the freedom of the Kingdom. The Triune God calls forth people to be baptized into new life—a Kingdom life for which they are prepared and from which they are called to increase in apprehension of both the divine identity and the called, communal and worshipful response of their own identity as the people of God.

DISCUSSION OF MINISTRY APPLICATION PROJECT

The effort to grasp the depth of baptismal story, imagery, practical history, and contextual expression can be overwhelming to say the least. Accordingly, the purpose of the baptismal instruction offered through the “Pastor’s Study” at Alamo Heights United Methodist Church was not to introduce every detail and historical fact. One wonders if such a task is even truly possible. Rather, the purpose was to introduce broad concepts of baptismal connection in hopes of encouraging open postures that are willing and eager receive continual, development and revelation of the Cosmic story both from the Triune God and from the community of faith. In other words, the aim was to present enough of the overarching beauty of baptism in order to loosen our doctrinal and theological grip and raise open hands that can receive and share the story of baptism.

Crucial to such a task was the engendering of open discussion and conversation during class time. There is perhaps no greater human motivation for broadening our perspective than honestly considering the viewpoints and experiences of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. Certainly, such conversations can become argumentative and produce little resulting fruit. Nevertheless, when people feel safe to share different ideas and dissenting opinions, the

exchange can be priceless in terms of development. In his book *The Noonday Demon*, Dr. John N. Blackwell writes of the depth of understanding that can come when seeing people see themselves in communal context by likening the experience to seeing one's reflection in a bathroom mirror versus a pool of water in a forest.

When you see your reflection in the severe light of the bathroom, your reflection is harsh. All of you is reflected back to you are once, 'warts and all.' We see ourselves as we are, and frequently don't like what we see.

But in a pool we see a reflection that is miraculously modified, or transformed, by nature. The harshness is filtered out...our reflection is more natural. We better fit our surroundings. It's not that we blend in, in the sense that we cease to be individuals. But reflected in a pool, we belong with the pool and the trees and the rich blue sky and the soft light that is reflected in the pool. Our reflection in the pool also appears deeper than our reflection in the harsh bathroom mirror. Instead of looking at ourselves critically, as we do in the mirror, we see ourselves at home in the world.⁴⁰

In the hopes of creating such a natural environment for reflection, each class began with prayer for an atmosphere of love, honor, and openness to be empowered and encouraged by the Spirit. Following the time of prayer, the weekly centering Scripture was read followed by a humorous and hopefully disarming video clip. Immediately after the clips were shown, prepared questions were put before the class to foster discussion and prepare the class for the direction of the day's instruction. Although each class included 30-45 minutes of prepared instruction, discussion and questions were always encouraged and welcomed. Each class was scheduled to last one hour but inevitably ran closer to 75 minutes—gladly due to questions and discussion.

The theme for the first week's class was the ritual water purification of *Mikvah*. In a community that considers their attachment to the Hebraic root of central importance, it seemed wise to begin with the ancient Israelite understanding and embrace of Spirit-powered waters that bring forth new life. In addition to highlighting the baptismal foundations Christianity inherited

⁴⁰ John N. Blackwell, *The Noonday Demon: Recognizing and Conquering the Deadly Sin of Sloth* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 102.

from the Mikvah, this exploration allowed the class to immediately expose and wrestle with doctrinal discomfort over both infant baptism and modes of baptism in the light of the understanding and traditions passed down by its Hebraic forebears.

The second week of instruction and discussion focused on the layered symbols and stories of water deliverance and baptism found in the Scriptures. While images of water, death, rescue, cleansing, and rebirth can be found throughout the Bible, the instruction focused on the hyper-significant, connected baptismal stories of the Creation, the Flood, the Exodus, the Crossing of the Jordan, and the Baptism of Christ. Walking through each of these stories to find the similarities, differences, and resulting theological implications exposed the class to the depth and detail of divine layering that occurs in Scripture. Furthermore, using the Lutheran, Episcopal, and United Methodist liturgies of baptism, the class was able to follow each denomination's faithful efforts in connecting baptism to the stories of the Scripture.

In the third instruction, the class received an extremely high-altitude overview of the history of baptism in Christianity. Needless to say, covering approximately 2,000 years of history in 45 minutes of instruction limited the scope to only the most significant developments and general movements. Nevertheless, even such an overarching glimpse revealed points of faithful connection as well as encouraged consideration of how the people of God have sought to honor the divine identity and their calling in baptism throughout history. Exploring the history of baptism in the Church also allowed the class to see that questions of mode and appropriate baptismal age are topics with which the faithful have wrestled for more than a millennia—making their doctrinal discomfort seem less strange and unique.

The final week of class presented the class with the opportunity to externally process the instruction, their discussions, and questions. The hope was to draw lines of connection and

foster a dialogue about how the class considered the baptismal practices and understanding of Alamo Heights United Methodist Church to be honoring—or dishonoring—the “Good Root” of the Hebraic Mikvah, the “Deep Waters” of scriptural story, and the “Rich Soil” of baptismal history in the Church. The resulting discussion was lively and, surprisingly, not entirely focused on infant baptism. In large part, class members were able to see the debate over infant baptism as a larger concern—as Mark Searle addressed in his essay “Infant Baptism Reconsidered.”

First, it is striking that past and present discussions about infant baptism are rarely about baptism alone or about infants at all. Usually the subject of infant baptism is raised in the context of another argument, whether it be about the nature of the Church as a community of witness or about the relationship of God’s grace to human works.⁴¹

Confronting this reality helped the class to move from defending doctrinal grounds of infant baptism and consider a larger reality of who God reveals God to be in the stories and images of baptism and who they are called to be in response to that divine identity.

Each week, the instruction was built around a multimedia presentation containing video clips, artwork, and photographs in an effort to remain engaging. Class members also received relevant handouts each week, and all course materials—including teaching notes and slides—were made available online. Class members were also asked to complete a questionnaire prior to the first class to garner their initial experience and thoughts on baptism as well as a similar questionnaire following the last class in an effort to reveal any new directions or ideas that the class had fostered.

⁴¹ Mark Searle, “Infant Baptism Reconsidered” *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, Maxwell E. Johnson, ed. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 386.

SUMMARY OF FEEDBACK

Professor Geoffrey Bromiley told me how one day, standing in the mountains of the Sierra Nevada in California, high above Yosemite Valley, he was gazing at the beauty of the scene—cascading waterfalls, the gigantic sequoia redwood trees, the lake below—when someone beside him exclaimed: “Do you know, if they put a dam down there, they could flood this valley and irrigate the farms of central California!” This person was preoccupied with the question of how to find enough water to meet human needs! It shows the pragmatism of our culture, which evaluates our world in terms of utility, means and ends, two totally different apperceptions. The one saw beauty and the other only utility.⁴²

James B. Torrance’s story of different people seeing different visions of the Yosemite Valley is an excellent place to begin to grapple with the results of the pre-class and post-class surveys.

The data collected is most certainly interesting and somewhat revealing. Part of what the questionnaires reveal, however, is the inevitability of completely different perspectives. People can behold the same image, experience the same event, receive the same instruction and arrive at completely different conclusions. Such conclusions most often reveal more about the concluder than they do about the subject of conclusion. Nevertheless, the collected data from the anonymous questionnaires is worthy of consideration if for no other reason than it appears to reveal a general movement away from a simple doctrinal grasp toward an appreciation for the cosmic depth and diverse beauty of story, symbolism, and faithful application of baptism.

As the survey examples included in the Appendix show, both the pre-class and post-class questionnaires contained seven short answer questions. The first question of the pre-class survey asked, “Why do we baptize?” Of the approximately fifty completed pre-class questionnaires, the most common answer to this question indicated that Christians baptize in obedience to the commandment of Christ—“Because Jesus told us to and because he set the example.” Another common response held baptism as a symbol of cleansing and repentance—“To wash away our

⁴² James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 70.

sin.” While there were certainly exceptions, very few of the responses expressed ideas of being born into a new identity or being delivered through the waters into the community of God’s people.

Contrastingly, the post-class survey’s slight rephrasing of the question to “How have your thoughts or ideas changed as to why we baptize?” yielded a broader appreciation for the depth of divine and communal identity found in the waters of baptism—“I see a much larger picture and a much larger story.” Another respondent indicated, “My thoughts have been expanded and I have a better understanding of the historical roots of baptism. I appreciate thinking of baptism as a covenant with God.” Almost all of the post-class surveys indicated an appreciation for the broader picture and story of baptism as revealed in the Scriptures and the history of the Church.

The second survey question remained the same for both the pre-class and post-class surveys—asking the class members how they would describe baptism to someone who had no knowledge or experience of baptism. The results bore great resemblance to the migration displayed in the first question. Whereas responses before the class described baptism as a symbol of cleansing, repentance, and declaration of faith, the post-class responses demonstrated a deeper engagement of many of the layers of baptismal imagery. As one respondent wrote,

Baptism is our rite of initiation, cleansing, and incorporation into God’s story of redemption. There are many interwoven stories of God delivering his people through water in the Bible. Baptism has its roots in Judaism where it symbolized being born into new life. It allows us to grow into our identity and continue our journey toward the Lord.

Although the first two questions of the surveys indirectly portray the desired movement toward a more open posture of baptismal theology and embrace, the third question on the post-class survey directly asked, “How have your thoughts or ideas changed regarding the correct expression or method of baptism?” In deference to the wisdom of James Torrance’s story, there

were respondents who indicated no change had occurred. There were many rewarding responses, however, that affirmed yet again the desired shift. One respondent offered, “Growing up as a Southern Baptist, I always felt that “complete immersion” was the true form (of baptism). I have now realized that there are a variety of methods and they all symbolize the same commitment to Christ.” Similarly, another response stated, “There are so many different ways among the Christian denominations that baptism is done, but the goal is the same. I am probably more accepting of diversity of methods than I was prior to coming to this class.”

The fourth question on both the pre-class and post-class survey asked the class members to indicate which stories of the Bible they associated with baptism. Almost without exception, the pre-class surveys referenced the baptism of Jesus with only a handful of respondents offering any other biblical reference. Again, the post-class survey revealed the rewarding movement that most of the class had made to connect the stories of the Creation, the Flood, the Exodus, and the Crossing of the Jordan to their baptism. One respondent summarized this connection writing, “Before this study I would not have seen the correlation from so many of the Old Testament stories that I do now.”

The fifth question of the survey sought to determine the class members’ understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in baptism. True to their Methodist credentials, a majority of the respondents expressed the integral role of the Spirit in both the pre-class and post-class survey. This area of the questionnaire pre-supposed that there might be some confusion among the members as to “baptism in the Holy Spirit” being different from a “regular” baptism. Class discussion and the corresponding survey results seem to indicate that it was not an area of confusion for the class members. Virtually all of the responses indicated a belief in the presence and action of the Holy Spirit in every baptism—regardless of age or mode.

Questions six and seven on the survey yielded very little measurable data—most likely evidence of poorly crafted questions. While not particularly helpful toward measuring the movement of the class, the last two questions on the survey did foster further discussion among the class members. The sixth allowed the class members to comment on how they thought Alamo Heights United Methodist Church could better honor and engage the Sacrament of baptism. Some answers to this question revealed a great appreciation for the church's current baptismal practices. Another common response was a desire for more baptisms by immersion. Although baptisms by immersion are offered at Alamo Heights United Methodist Church, these responses seem to indicate the need to better educate the congregation as to their availability.

The seventh question allowed class members to submit their questions regarding baptism in writing. Whereas the sparing pre-class responses commonly indicated concerns about the appropriateness of infant baptism, the post-class responses were nonexistent. While some might take the lack of post-class responses to this question as indication of a job well done, it is extremely unlikely that there were no lingering questions regarding baptism and more likely that the class members were ready to get out of class.

Overall, the results of the post-class survey were encouraging and showed that many of the class members had felt their understanding of baptism had deepened. The surveys as well as my post-class discussion with many of the class members revealed they now were better able to see the connectivity of their baptism to the biblical stories, the Hebraic root, and the history of baptism's expression in the church. Many members also reported a loosening of their doctrinal grip on baptism and a migration toward freedom and flexibility with regard to mode and the appropriate age for baptism. Perhaps the most rewarding result was to recognize that the biblically and historically consistent thread of being called to and brought through spirit-

empowered waters for the purposes of being released into a new identity as a beloved child of God was received and will frame our conversation going forward.

CONCLUSION

Human freedom is fulfilled in involvement with God and God's purposes, and this means constant discernment of vocation and responsibility within an unfolding drama whose central act is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is an ongoing, irreducibly dramatic reality, and living within it requires alertness to God, other people, oneself, creation, and whatever is happening now, always looking toward the future God is promising. Baptism gives an identity immersed in this God-centered drama, and Christian living is daily participation in it.⁴³

The comprehensive application and embrace of any worship theology is not evidenced nor contained by the implementation of a single liturgical practice. Nevertheless, the recovery and integration of any piece of the "God-centered drama" is both restorative and liberating. The specific rites of baptismal preparation and progression—as framed by the persecuted faithful of the first and second centuries and the evangelically overwhelmed Christians of the third century—are bound to the times, places and cultures in which they were originally expressed. Nevertheless, the idea that the Creator invites humanity to be "born of water and Spirit" (John 3:5) in order to become a new creation in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:17) and that such a rebirth deserves instruction, conversation, and reflection stands outside of such boundaries.

As the Apostle Paul offered that baptism should be understood as spiritually enmeshed with the covenant of circumcision (Colossians 2:11-13), his writing in the Second Chapter of his letter to the Romans seems to underline the need for preparation for and progression from covenantal observance.

Circumcision, the surgical ritual that marks you as a Jew, is great if you live in accord with God's law. But if you don't, it's worse than not being circumcised. The reverse is also true: The uncircumcised who keep God's ways are as good as the

⁴³ David F. Ford, *The Future of Christian Theology* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 2011) 27.

circumcised—in fact, better. Better to keep God’s law uncircumcised than break it circumcised. Don’t you see: It’s not the cut of a knife that makes a Jew. You become a Jew by who you are. It’s the mark of God on your heart, not of a knife on your skin, that makes a Jew. (Romans 2:25-29)

In seeming contradiction to *Ex opere operato*, Paul would argue that it is not the water of baptism that births us into new Kingdom life. Rather, “It’s the mark of God on our hearts”—and the sanctifying power of the Spirit that enables us to live and grow in ways that honor the divine identity and intercession.

For this writer, suggesting the implementation of a class or instructive opportunity that honors the story of Scripture and the ideas and observances preserved by the history of our faith into a contemporary worshiping community must be limited to the charismatic, Hebraically rooted, Methodist tradition to which I can address with experiential authority. As previously noted, current baptismal practices within our worshiping community allow for random baptisms of any willing un-baptized candidate—or willing parents of an infant candidate—as long as they submit to an initial instructive appointment with a pastor. Initiation and preparatory practices are limited to an eight-month confirmation class for eighth graders and a six-week membership class for adults wishing to become members. While it is possible that baptism will be covered as a topic of instruction in any number of classes offered by the church, there is no current specific and focused instruction on baptism or the developmental understanding of living into the covenant of baptism as disciples.

Allowing for the reality and beauty of diverse expressions—as was evidenced in the “Early Churches”—it would seem unwise to eliminate or drastically alter any of these current practices. Rather, a more beneficial approach might be to expand upon these current practices by offering an annual instructional and conversational group that would focus on the biblical and historical story of baptism as well as the pursuit of its authentic and honoring expression and

engagement in the developing life of discipleship. The small group could meet weekly during the season of Lent to receive instruction and participate in discussion on baptism together. If the class contains new candidates for baptism, meeting during the season of Lent would allow for baptism on Easter should the candidates desire it. This is not to imply that the class would be only for those who were not yet baptized. Quite to the contrary, the hope would be that the class would include a range of ages and experiences so as to better engender a wider discussion and viewpoint base. While it would seem advisable that the small group has consistent leadership, visiting elders and authorities in different areas of Christian education could relieve both the burden and monotony of instruction.

According to the development of each small group through the year, it might be appropriate to invite the members of the group to engage the season of Lent through communal baptismal preparation by praying with and for each other, fasting together and withdrawing together for a planned time of spiritual retreat and renewal. Following the season of Lent, any un-baptized members wishing to receive baptism would be recognized, blessed and baptized on Easter Sunday while previously-baptized members of the class would be offered an opportunity to commemorate their baptisms in Christian Mikvah or communal testimony. Although the small group would hopefully grow together throughout Lent outside of the context of the larger congregation, it is important for the Sacrament to be witnessed by the larger community of faith. William Dyrness writes to such importance in *A Primer On Christian Worship: Where We've Been, Where We Are, Where We Can Go*. "Seeing people come to receive baptism...serves to remind the gathered community of their own baptism and the cleansing renewal that this

represents. It continues to signify that, by baptism, we have been made participants in Christ's death and resurrection."⁴⁴

Following Easter, it would be desirable (but not required) for the group to continue meeting during the remainder of the Easter season to discuss their baptism and new life in the Christian faith. It is even foreseeable that the bonds formed in the group might allow for a continuing life group for support and spiritual development. Regardless of the continuation of the initial group, it would be beneficial for the recently baptized to assist in the encouragement and, possibly, instruction of the next year's class.

While such an application might not be practical for all traditions and cultures, it nevertheless represents a needed step in the recovery and broadening of liturgical understanding and practice. As is stated in *"Defining the Task of a Theology of Worship,"* such steps are not only "timely;" they are "urgent."

There is a widespread sense among Christians in North America that all is not well with the church, that we need a new sense of direction, a new dynamism.

In particular, we need something that will capture the imagination and enthusiasm of young adults. The institutional loyalty that many older Christians grew up with is no longer evident among young people. Many of them are walking away from the church, not necessarily because they are hostile to religion, not because they object to the teachings or standards of the church, but because they just don't sense any particular value in participating in the Christian community. They see it as an option for those who want it, but certainly not a necessity for their own lives. There is a growing sense that we need a revitalization of church life, something to convey the excitement that being a Christian involves. What we need is a new understanding of worship.⁴⁵

There exists presently in the Christian faith a widening chasm of faith and praxis brought about by more cultural, traditional, and sinful factors than this simple writing can adequately discuss. The good news is that same Christian faith serves a God who delights in

⁴⁴ Dyrness, *A Primer on Christian Worship*, 112.

⁴⁵ Webber, ed., "Defining the Task of a Theology of Worship" *The Complete Library of Christian Worship, Volume II*, 261.

redeeming the “unredeemable.” The liturgical history that birthed the catechetical instruction and baptismal preparation and development is but a part of the cosmic story of God’s love.

Any step that recovers a piece of what God has done and how the people of God have responded in the past helps to inform the progressive apprehension of the faithful in the present and shape the hope of their relationship with God and to each other in the future.

Any step that honors the entire story—the story for which God has always been sovereign—helps the faithful fulfill the commission they have been given. As Robert Webber reminds his readers in *Ancient Future Worship: Proclaiming and Enacting God’s Narrative*,

Worship remembers God’s story through historical recitation and dramatic reenactment. We sing, preach, recite, and enact the story of God’s great deeds of salvation. This theme is found repeatedly in Scripture from the very beginnings of worship in the time of Noah, in all of Israel’s worship, in the church’s worship, and in the eternal worship of the heavens.⁴⁶

The entire history of baptism within the Christian faith belongs to God. Regardless of any liturgical mistakes derived from the intention and execution of a fallen humanity, the LORD has maintained the throne. The cosmic story of God’s redemptive love—the story in which all other stories enfold—has never ceased. The story of baptism throughout time—warts and all—belongs in the remembrance of a faithful people attempting to grow in relationship and frame their worshipful response to their God. Throughout the Scriptures, humanity is invited to realign with the story God is telling. For disciples of Jesus Christ, the Savior commands his followers into the story: “Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you.” (Matt 28:19-20). In doing so, the faithful develop their apprehension for the Triune God by remembering and reenacting the story. That increasing

⁴⁶ Robert Webber, *Ancient-future Worship: Proclaiming and enacting God's narrative* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2008), 55.

apprehension in turn drives a worshipful response that prepares for and is baptized into new life in the Kingdom of God.

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APPENDIX 1

LOVE GOD, LOVE OTHERS: AN OUTLINE OF MISSION UNDERSTANDING

AT ALAMO HEIGHTS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

Love God,

- **Identity** – engage, understand and embrace who God is and who we are.
 - *Kingdom of God* – we partner with and in the Kingdom
 - Invite all to its present and tangible access.
 - Work to bring shalom to chaos
 - Mercy
 - Justice
 - Healing
 - Wholeness
 - *Hebraic root* – we are grafted in (Romans 11) and must necessarily seek to understand and engage the tree onto which we have been grafted
 - Study / engage / explore / memorize the Scriptures
 - Commitment to the Scriptures is not static—it is ever-evolving
 - 70 faces of the text
 - Clarity comes in the living
 - Study / engage / explore our history and context
 - *Community* – not an option—it’s how we are designed to live
- **Discipleship** – following and copying our Rabbi.
 - *Sonship / Daughterhood* – be subject to the Father’s mission
 - *Humility* – humble yourself before all people
 - *Submission* – get underneath and push up
 - *Authority* – we don’t submit for the sake of the authority, we submit for the Kingdom
- **Seek** – pursue the presence of the LORD with abandon.
 - *Prayer*
 - *Worship*
 - *Scriptures*
 - *Disciplines*

Love Others.

- **Culture of Honor** - there is value and something to celebrate in every human life.
 - *Relationship first*
 - Loving is more important than being right
 - Execution and performance are not more important than people
 - Negation is unnecessary
 - Someone does not have to be wrong or less-than for us to feel safe or right
 - *Reject fear, guilt, and anxiety as motivations*
 - Seek to honor and lift up the “best possible” in others rather than defending ourselves against the “worst possible”
 - *Do not dishonor yourself*
 - We need Sabbath
 - We need relationship
 - We are more important to God than what we can do for God
 - We must reject the notion that we “have” to get things done for the Kingdom or God will fall off the throne.
 - God→Spouse→Children→Family→Community
- **Serve the World**
 - *Build relationships and grow community*
 - *Encourage, comfort and help others*
 - Missions – the Body of Christ is necessarily connected throughout the world and to the world.
 - Giving – our time, our gifts, and our resources
 - *Train disciples*
 - *Raise up and empower new leaders*

APPENDIX 2
CLASS HANDOUTS

from Rikvah Slonim's article "The Mikvah" from Chabad.org

Jewish life is marked by the notion of *Havdalah* -- separation and distinction. On Saturday night, as the *Shabbat* departs and the new week begins, Jews are reminded of the borders that delineate every aspect of life. Over a cup of sanctified wine, the Jew blesses G-d who "separates between the holy and the mundane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and six days of labor...."

In fact, the literal definition of the Hebrew word *kodesh* -- most often translated as "holy" -- is that which is separated; segregated from the rest for a unique purpose, for consecration.

In many ways *mikvah* is the threshold separating the unholy from the holy, but it is even more. Simply put, immersion in a *mikvah* signals a change in status -- more correctly, an elevation in status. Its unparalleled function lies in its power of transformation, its ability to effect metamorphosis.

Utensils that could heretofore not be used can, after immersion, be utilized in the holy act of eating as a Jew. A woman, who from the onset of her menses was in a state of *niddut*, separated from her husband, may after immersion be reunited with him in the ultimate holiness of married intimacy. Men or women in Temple times, who were precluded from services because of ritual defilement, could, after immersion, alight the Temple Mount, enter the House of G-d and involve themselves in sacrificial offerings and the like. The case of the convert is most dramatic. The individual who descends into the *mikvah* as a gentile emerges from beneath its waters as a Jew.

G-d's commandments, the 613 injunctions known as *mitzvot*, are divided into three distinct categories: *Mishpatim* are those laws governing the civil and moral fabric of life; they are logical, readily understood, and widely appreciated as pivotal to the foundation and maintenance of a healthy society. Examples are the proscription against murder, theft, and adultery. *Eidut* are those rituals and rites best described as testimonials. This category includes the many religious acts that remind Jews of historic moments in their history and serve as testament to cardinal beliefs of the Jewish faith, such as the observance of the Sabbath, the celebration of Passover, and the affixing of a *mezuzah* on the doorpost.

The third category, *chukkim*, are supra-rational principles; they are Divine decrees about which the human mind can form no judgment.

Chukkim completely defy human intellect and understanding. From time immemorial they have been a source of amusement, a target of scorn, and an uncomfortable and shameful presence to the detractors of Jewish observance. For the observant Jew, they personify a mitzvah at its best; a pure, unadulterated avenue of connection with G-d. These mitzvot are recognized as the greatest, the ones capable of affecting the soul on the deepest level. Unimpeded by the limitations of the human mind, these statutes are practiced for one reason only: the fulfillment of G-d's word. Examples are the laws of Kashrut, the prohibition against wearing *shatnez* (clothes containing a combination of wool and linen), and the laws of ritual purity and *mikvah*.

When all is said and done, an understanding of the ultimate reason for the framework of Family Purity and its culminating point -- immersion in the *mikvah* -- is impossible. We observe simply because G-d so ordained it. Still there are insights that can help add dimension and meaning to our *mikvah* experience.

In the beginning there was only water. A miraculous compound, it is the primary source and vivifying factor of all sustenance and, by extension, all life as we know it. But Judaism teaches it is more. For these very same attributes -- water as source and sustaining energy -- are mirrored in the spiritual. Water has the power to purify: to restore and replenish life to our essential, spiritual selves.

The *mikvah* personifies both the womb and the grave; the portals to life and afterlife. In both, the person is stripped of all power and prowess. In both there is a mode of total reliance, complete abdication of control. Immersion in the *mikvah* can be understood as a symbolic act of self-abnegation, the conscious suspension of the self as an autonomous force. In so doing, the immersing Jew signals a desire to achieve oneness with the source of all life, to return to a primeval unity with G-d. Immersion indicates the abandonment of one form of existence to embrace one infinitely higher. In keeping with this theme, immersion in the *mikvah* is described not only in terms of purification, revitalization, and rejuvenation but also -- and perhaps primarily -- as rebirth.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Rivkah Slonim, "The Mikvah" *Acts of Transformation*.

Inter-Lutheran

Holy God, mighty Lord, gracious Father: We give you thanks, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and you created heaven and earth. By the gift of water you nourish and sustain us and all living things.

By the waters of the flood you condemned the wicked and saved those whom you had chosen, Noah and his family. You led Israel by the pillar of cloud and fire through the sea, out of slavery into the freedom of the promised land. In the waters of the Jordan your Son was baptized by John and anointed with the Spirit. By the baptism of his own death and resurrection, your beloved Son has set us free from bondage to sin and death and has opened the way to the joy and freedom of everlasting life. He made water a sign of the kingdom and of cleansing and rebirth. In obedience to his command, we make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Pour out your Holy Spirit, gracious Father, to make this a water of cleansing. Wash away the sins of all those who enter it, and bring them forth as inheritors of your glorious kingdom.

To you be given praise and honor and worship through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and forever. *Amen.*

Episcopal

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water. Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation. Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit. Therefore in joyful obedience to your Son, we bring into his fellowship those who come to him in faith, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Now sanctify this water, we pray you, by the power of your Holy Spirit, that those who here are cleansed from sin and born again may continue for ever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Savior. To him, to you, and to the Holy Spirit, be all honor and glory, now and for ever. *Amen.*

United Methodist

Minister

Eternal God:

When nothing existed but chaos,
you swept across the dark waters
and brought forth light.

In the days of Noah

you saved those on the ark through water.

After the flood you set in the clouds a rainbow.

When you saw your people as slaves in Egypt,
you led them to freedom through the sea.

Their children you brought through the Jordan
to the land which you promised.

Congregation

Sing to the Lord all the earth.

Tell of his mercy each day.

Minister

In the fullness of time you sent Jesus,
nurtured in the water of a womb.

He was baptized by John
and anointed by your Spirit.

He called his disciples
to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection
and to make disciples of all nations.

Congregation

Declare his works to the nations,
his glory among all the people.

Minister

By the power of your Holy Spirit,
bless this gift of water

⁴⁸ Maxwell E. Johnson, ed. *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 278-279.

...ON BAPTISM

The Didache - Chapter 7 - Concerning Baptism

And concerning baptism, baptize this way: Having first said all these things, baptize into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, in living water. But if you have no living water, baptize into other water; and if you cannot do so in cold water, do so in warm. But if you have neither, pour out water three times upon the head into the name of Father and Son and Holy Spirit. But before the baptism let the baptizer fast, and the baptized, and whoever else can; but you shall order the baptized to fast one or two days before.⁴⁹

The Apostolic Fathers & The Early Church Fathers and writers

The first clear reference to infant baptism is in Irenaeus, writing at the end of the second century. Half a century later, in his commentary of Romans, Origen could write, 'The church received a tradition from the apostles to administer baptism, even to infants.' Infant baptism, in some areas at least, doubtless antedates the references in Irenaeus. While theologians may have dealt with infant baptism in documents lost to us, it is important to remember that the early theologizing still extant supports a practice already in existence. It is interpretation after the fact; it is not done to introduce a new practice.⁵⁰

Only infants, when they come to baptism, are exempt from the act of repentance. For they have not yet the use of free will. Nevertheless, for their consecration to God and the remission of original sin, the faith of those persons who bring them to the font is availing for them.⁵¹

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Baptism is the first and chief sacrament of forgiveness of sins because it unites us with Christ, who died for our sins and rose for our justification, so that "we too might walk in newness of life."

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: "Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water and in the word."⁵²

⁴⁹ Peter Kirby, "Early Christian Writings," *The Didache*).

⁵⁰ Eugene L. Brand, "Baptism and Communion of Infants: A Lutheran View," *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, Maxwell E. Johnson, ed. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 354.

⁵¹ Augustine, "Homily 50," quoted in *The Gospel According to St. Mark: Illustrated (Chiefly in the Doctrinal and Moral Sense) from Ancient and Modern Authors* (ed. J. Ford; London: J. Masters, 1864) 237-238.

⁵² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catechism/catechism-of-the-catholic-church/epub/index.cfm> (accessed March 1, 2013).

Protestant Reformers

If this sacrament were to be given to adults and older people, I think it could not possibly have retained its power and its glory against the tyranny of greed and superstition which has everywhere laid waste to divine things. Doubtless the wisdom of the flesh would here too have devised its preparations and worthinesses, its reservations, restrictions, and I know not what other snares for taking money, until water fetched as high a price as parchment does now.⁵³

Now, if we are to investigate whether or not baptism is justly given to infants, will we not say that the man trifles, or rather is delirious, who would stop short at the element of water, and the external observance, and not allow his mind to rise to the spiritual mystery? If reason is listened to, it will undoubtedly appear that baptism is properly administered to infants as a thing due to them. The Lord did not anciently bestow circumcision upon them without making them partakers of all the things signified by circumcision.⁵⁴

John Wesley

It is the initiatory sacrament, which enters us into covenant with God. It was instituted by Christ, who alone has power to institute a proper sacrament, a sign, seal, pledge, and means of grace, perpetually obligatory on all Christians. We know not, indeed, the exact time of its institution; but we know it was long before our Lord's ascension. And it was instituted in the room of circumcision. For, as that was a sign and seal of God's covenant, so is this.

And as there is no clear proof of dipping in Scripture, so there is very probable proof of the contrary. It is highly probable, the Apostles themselves baptized great numbers, not by dipping, but by washing, sprinkling, or pouring water. This clearly represented the cleansing from sin, which is figured by baptism. And the quantity of water used was not material; no more than the quantity of bread and wine in the Lord's supper.

The infants of believers, the true children of faithful Abraham always were under the gospel covenant. They were included in it, they had a right to it and to the seal of it; as an infant heir has a right to his estate, though he cannot yet have actual possession.

If it be objected, "There is no express mention in Scripture of any infants whom the Apostles baptized," I would ask, Suppose no mention had been made in the Acts of those two women baptized by the Apostles, yet might we not fairly conclude, that when so many thousands, so many entire households, were baptized, women were not excluded? especially since it was the known custom of the Jews to baptize them? The same holds of children; nay, more strongly, on the account of circumcision.

On the whole, therefore, it is not only lawful and innocent, but meet, right, and our bounden duty, in conformity to the uninterrupted practice of the whole Church of Christ from the earliest ages, to consecrate our children to God by baptism, as the Jewish Church were commanded to do by circumcision.⁵⁵

⁵³ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of Church*, Gary Ray Branscome, "Understanding what Luther Taught About Baptism," <http://heartoftn.net/users/gary27/aboutbap.htm> (accessed March 1, 2013).

⁵⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, "The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein," <http://www.spurgeon.org/~phil/calvin/bk4ch16.html> (accessed March 1, 2013).

⁵⁵ John Wesley, *A Treatise on Baptism: 1756*.

Dogs Watching a Chess Match

James B. Torrance

Professor Geoffrey Bromiley told me how one day, standing in the mountains of the Sierra Nevada in California, high above Yosemite Valley, he was gazing at the beauty of the scene—cascading waterfalls, the gigantic sequoia redwood trees, the lake below—when someone beside him exclaimed: “Do you know, if they put a dam down there, they could flood this valley and irrigate the farms of central California!” This person was preoccupied with the question of how to find enough water to meet human needs! It shows the pragmatism of our culture, which evaluates our world in terms of utility, means and ends, two totally different apperceptions. The one saw beauty and the other only utility.⁵⁶

Paul F.X. Covino

Essentially, the proposals of the mature adulthood school (of baptism) developed out of a dual concern with the quality of faith in communities and the manner of celebrating baptism. Thus, the question which the authors were ultimately trying to answer was how to improve the quality of faith and church life.⁵⁷

Mark Searle

Modern discussions of infant baptism have largely been stimulated by a growing sense of the fragility of Christianity in the modern Western world and by the perceived need for a more credible witness to the Gospel in contemporary society...What was ultimately at stake was less the salvation of infants than the salvation of the Church as a witnessing community.⁵⁸

First, it is striking that past and present discussions about infant baptism are rarely about baptism alone or about infants at all. Usually the subject of infant baptism is raised in the context of another argument, whether it be about the nature of the Church as a community of witness or about the relationship of God’s grace to human works.⁵⁹

Eugene L. Brand

People who still regard their communion as a private matter between themselves and God will continue to see the privilege on the altar as an ‘adult privilege.’ For them the sacrament tends to be related to understanding, or faith, or contrition. But where people have caught the vision of the Eucharist as a corporate meal, the question must eventually arise, Why can’t the children participate?⁶⁰

Aidan Kavanagh

“We are, perhaps just beginning to realize that our problem is not primarily liturgical, but social. The problem is with ourselves as a community of faith shared. Liturgical problems are mere symptoms of this more radical malaise.”⁶¹

⁵⁶ Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 70.

⁵⁷ Paul F.X. Covino, “The Postconciliar Infant Baptism Debate in the American Catholic Church,” *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, Maxwell E. Johnson, ed. (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 330.

⁵⁸ Searle, “Infant Baptism Reconsidered,” *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*: 378.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 386.

⁶⁰ Brand, “Baptism and Communion of Infants: A Lutheran View,” *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*, 351.

⁶¹ Kavanagh, “Initiation: Baptism and Confirmation” *Worship*, 264.

Carla A. Waterman

In baptism we renounce the enemy who wants to destroy us, the fallen powers of the world that swing us in their undulating wake, our own flesh with its natural propensity to choose deathly independence. These are the culprits that make our lives so very complicated, and as we enter the church we are bid to leave them outside.⁶²

Craig A. Satterlee

The first thing we needed to do to get ready for baptism was to find our baptismal font. It wasn't actually lost. Rather, our baptismal font had fallen into a state of disuse. It was tucked away in a corner of the chancel, the part of the church near the altar, like a revered relic we used once upon a time rather than a focal point of our worship space. We moved the font halfway down the center aisle so that everyone could turn and have a good view of the baptism and to suggest that God surrounds the child being baptized with the love and support of the Christian community.⁶³

Miroslav Volf

Rather, baptism into Christ creates a people as the differentiated body of Christ. Bodily inscribed differences are brought together, not removed. The body of Christ lives as a complex interplay of differentiated bodies—Jewish and gentile, female and male, slave and free—of those who have partaken in Christ's self-sacrifice.⁶⁴

By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism

The Holy Spirit who is the power of creation (Genesis 1:2) is also the giver of new life. Working in the lives of people before, during, and after their baptisms, the Spirit is the effective agent of salvation. God bestows upon baptized persons the presence of the Holy Spirit, marks them with an identifying seal as God's own, and implants in their hearts the first installment of their inheritance as sons and daughters of God (2 Corinthians 1:21-22).

Christ constitutes the church as his Body by the power of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:13, 27). The church draws new persons into itself as it seeks to remain faithful to its commission to proclaim and exemplify the gospel. Baptism is the sacrament of initiation and incorporation into the body of Christ. An infant, child, or adult who is baptized becomes a member of the catholic (universal) church, of the denomination, and of the local congregation (see pp. 729-31). Therefore, baptism is a rite of the whole church, which ordinarily requires the participation of the gathered, worshiping congregation. In a series of promises within the liturgy of baptism, the community affirms its own faith and pledges to act as spiritual mentor and support for the one who is baptized. Baptism is not merely an individualistic, private, or domestic occasion.⁶⁵

⁶² Waterman, *Songs of Ascent*, Kindle Book.

⁶³ Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks Through Worship: Stories Congregations Live By* (Virginia: The Alban Institute, 2009) 40.

⁶⁴ Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 48.

⁶⁵ "By Water and the Spirit: A United Methodist Understanding of Baptism – A Report of the Baptism Study Committee," *The Book of Resolutions of The United Methodist Church* (The United Methodist Publishing House, 2004) http://archives.umc.org/interior_print.asp?ptid=4&mid=992 (accessed March 8, 2013).

APPENDIX 3
TEACHING NOTES

Baptism: What's the Story?

WEEK ONE

1. Introduction / surveys / disclaimer – allow time for survey completion
2. Prayer
3. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* clip – Delmar's baptism
 - a. Questions for class
 - i. What does baptism mean to you?
 - ii. Why do we baptize?
 - iii. What are some of the questions we have about baptism?
4. Explanation of outline – where we are going (maybe)
5. The root – we should engage & honor Hebraic root – Romans 11:16-24

Behind and underneath all this there is a holy, God-planted, God-tended root. If the primary root of the tree is holy, there's bound to be some holy fruit. Some of the tree's branches were pruned and you wild olive shoots were grafted in. Yet the fact that you are now fed by that rich and holy root gives you no cause to crow over the pruned branches. Remember, you aren't feeding the root; the root is feeding you.

It's certainly possible to say, "Other branches were pruned so that / could be grafted in!" Well and good. But they were pruned because they were deadwood, no longer connected by belief and commitment to the root. The only reason you're on the tree is because your graft "took" when you believed, and because you're connected to that belief-nurturing root. So don't get cocky and strut your branch. Be humbly mindful of the root that keeps you lithe and green.

If God didn't think twice about taking pruning shears to the natural branches, why would he hesitate over you? He wouldn't give it a second thought. Make sure you stay alert to these qualities of gentle kindness and ruthless severity that exist side by

side in God—ruthless with the deadwood, gentle with the grafted shoot. But don't presume on this gentleness. The moment you become deadwood, you're out of there.

And don't get to feeling superior to those pruned branches down on the ground. If they don't persist in remaining deadwood, they could very well get grafted back in. God can do that. He can perform miracle grafts. Why, if he could graft *you*—branches cut from a tree out in the wild—into an orchard tree, he certainly isn't going to have any trouble grafting branches back into the tree they grew from in the first place. Just be glad you're in the tree, and hope for the best for the others.

6. The Mikveh

- a. **definition** - collection, accumulation, a heap or mass of an object in one place; a mass of liquid, a water reservoir or water storage pool; a bath used for the purpose of ritual immersion in Judaism
- b. **First use** – Genesis 1:10 “God called the dry land Earth, and the waters that were (mikveh) gathered together he called Seas.
- c. **Hebraic Understanding** - The world's natural bodies of water—its oceans, rivers, wells, and spring-fed lakes—are *mikvahs* in their most primal form. They contain waters of divine source and thus, tradition teaches, the power to purify. Created even before the earth took shape, these bodies of water offer a quintessential route to consecration. In Rabbinical literature, mikveh waters were referred to as the “womb of the world.”
- d. **Primary importance** –
 - i. ancient understanding – mikveh before synagogue
 - ii. modern ortho – can sell a synagogue & Torah scrolls for mikveh

- iii. Jewish law – not a community without a communal mikveh

“The *mikvah* offers the individual, the community, and the nation of Israel the remarkable gift of purity and holiness. No other religious establishment, structure, or rite can affect the Jew in this way and, indeed, on such an essential level.”⁶⁶

e. In the Torah –

- i. Before the revelation at Sinai (Exodus 19:9-5)
- ii. As part of Aaron & his sons’ ordination (Leviticus 8)
- iii. As part of priestly preparation for Yom Kippur (Leviticus 16:4)

f. In midrash – (interpretation or exposition) “filling in the gaps of the biblical narrative”

- i. After banishment, Adam sat in one of the rivers flowing from the garden as part of his repentance.
- ii. According to a number of Jewish sages, “mayim”, which is the Hebrew word for water, shares the same root as the word “mah”, meaning “what.” This teaching points out that when a person immerses in water, they nullify the fleshly ego and ask “what am I?” as Moses and Aaron did in Exodus 16:7 when they said to the people, “what are we?”
- iii. “mikveh” & “hope” have same Hebraic root – Jeremiah 17:13

⁶⁶ Rivkah Slonim, “The Mikvah” *Acts of Transformation*.

- a. Akiva – compared mikveh immersion to the relationship between G-d & Israel...”just as the mikveh purifies the contaminated, so does the Holy One, blessed is he, purify Israel”⁶⁷
- b. interesting move to see the LORD as the “fountain of living water” – a metaphor Jesus will further define.
- g. **In Temple times** – priests as well as each Jew who wished entry into the Temple had to first immerse in a *mikveh*.
 - i. Ritual immersion and precise observance of the laws of purity were an inseparable part of Jewish life—especially in this location.

(Ancient Mikveh slides)

- h. **Purity** - It is important to note that the “laws of purity” and the mikveh’s role in the process of purification did not pertain to physical hygiene—rather both concepts were and are rooted in the spiritual.

Ancient Jews viewed the mikveh (baptism) as a process of spiritual cleansing and purification. It was performed only on persons and things that were considered to be unclean. Before the ritual was performed, the person being immersed undressed, physically cleansed, cut their nails, and made a confession of faith before the Elders, after which they immersed, often three times—Midrash: mikveh occurs 3 times in Torah

⁶⁷ Yoma 85b

Those immersed were not trying to achieve physical purity...they were asking for the LORD's intercession toward their spiritual purity.

i. 3 Required times according to Jewish law

- a. For pots and eating utensils manufactured by a non-Jew
- b. For women following menstruation (again not about physical cleanliness...beautiful imagery about life and death)
- c. For both men and women when converting to Judaism.

New converts immersed in the mikveh to demonstrate their willingness to forsake their Gentile background and to accept their new Jewish identity. Before immersion they would affirm their acceptance of Torah by declaring before the Elders, "I will do and I will hear"—a phrase from the oath originally taken by priests not to forsake the Torah. (Dt 29:9-14)

Rabbinic literature referred to the mikveh waters as "the womb of the world". Thus, converts coming out of the water were considered to have experienced a new birth, and were referred to as "a little child just born" or "a child of one day".

i. Havdalah – the notion of separation and distinction

(handout)

from Rikvah Slonim's article "The Mikvah" from Chabad.org

Jewish life is marked by the notion of *Havdalah* -- separation and distinction. On Saturday night, as the *Shabbat* departs and the new week begins, Jews are reminded of the borders that delineate every aspect of life. Over a cup of sanctified wine, the Jew blesses G-d who "separates between the holy and the mundane, between light and darkness, between Israel and the nations, between the seventh day and six days of labor...."

In fact, the literal definition of the Hebrew word *kodesh* -- most often translated as "holy" -- is that which is **separated**; segregated from the rest for a unique purpose, for consecration.

In many ways *mikvah* is the threshold separating the unholy from the holy, but it is even more. Simply put, immersion in a *mikvah* signals a change in status -- more correctly, an elevation in status. Its unparalleled function lies in its power of transformation, its ability to effect metamorphosis.

Utensils that could heretofore not be used can, after immersion, be utilized in the holy act of eating as a Jew. A woman, who from the onset of her menses was in a state of *niddut*, separated from her husband, may after immersion be reunited with him in the ultimate holiness of married intimacy. Men or women in Temple times, who were precluded from services because of ritual defilement, could, after immersion, alight the Temple Mount, enter the House of G-d and involve themselves in sacrificial offerings and the like. The case of the convert is most dramatic. The individual who descends into the *mikvah* as a gentile emerges from beneath its waters as a Jew.

G-d's commandments, the 613 injunctions known as *mitzvot*, are divided into three distinct categories:

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Eidut are those rituals and rites best described as testimonials. This category includes the many religious acts that remind Jews of historic

moments in their history and serve as testament to cardinal beliefs of the Jewish faith, such as the observance of the Sabbath, the celebration of Passover, and the affixing of a *mezuzah* on the doorpost.

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When all is said and done, an understanding of the ultimate reason for the framework of Family Purity and its culminating point -- immersion in the *mikvah* -- is impossible. We observe simply because G-d so ordained it. Still there are insights that can help add dimension and meaning to our *mikvah* experience.

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The *mikvah* personifies both the womb and the grave; the portals to life and afterlife. In both, the person is stripped of all power and prowess. In both there is a mode of total reliance, complete abdication of control. Immersion in the *mikvah* can be understood as a symbolic act of self-abnegation, the conscious suspension of the self as an autonomous force. In so doing, the immersing Jew signals a desire to achieve oneness with the source of all life, to return to a primeval unity with G-d. Immersion indicates the abandonment of one form of existence to embrace one infinitely higher. In keeping with

this theme, immersion in the *mikvah* is described not only in terms of purification, revitalization, and rejuvenation but also -- and perhaps primarily -- as rebirth.⁶⁸

j. Conclusion – Part 1

It is into such an understanding and embrace of the Mikveh that we can begin to grasp what John the Baptist was doing...(Matthew 3:1-12)

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

“The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

‘Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.’ ”

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

and ultimately, what Jesus was doing when he submitted himself for baptism.

⁶⁸ Rivkah Slonim, “The Mikvah” *Acts of Transformation*.

Mikveh can easily be understood as at least part of the reason Christ presented Himself for baptism prior to beginning his ministry on earth in Matthew 3:13-15. Priests were commanded, in the Old Testament, to be washed ceremonially before commencing their priestly duties interceding for Israel.

In *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, James F. White concurs. “Baptism had high authority in that the Lord himself had submitted to it at the beginning of his public ministry.”⁶⁹

Although Jesus was not in need of repentant cleansing, the Gospel accounts clearly indicate the baptism of Jesus initiated a new life for the people of God and the beginning of his ministry. Instead of a repeated ritual of self-cleansing, Jesus’ engagement of baptism demonstrated to his followers an act of submission to the will of God and coming Kingdom.

Following Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection and ascension, baptism—for his followers—had come to symbolize their desire to die to the kingdom of self, proclaim identity with the resurrection of Christ and begin a new life. Furthermore, as Christ’s command at the close of the Gospel of Matthew makes clear, his followers now understood baptism as part of their charge to usher new disciples into the Kingdom of God.

⁶⁹ White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship*, 20-22.

WEEK TWO

1. Prayer
2. Review / outline – where we are going (maybe)
3. Fulfillment – the culmination of baptismal stories in Christ – Matt. 3:13-17

Jesus then appeared, arriving at the Jordan River from Galilee. He wanted John to baptize him. John objected, “I’m the one who needs to be baptized, not you!”

But Jesus insisted. “Do it. God’s work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.” So John did it. The moment Jesus came up out of the baptismal waters, the skies opened up and he saw God’s Spirit—it looked like a dove—descending and landing on him.

And along with the Spirit, a voice: “This is my Son, chosen and marked by my love, delight of my life.”

4. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* clip – Saved by the flood
 - a. Questions for class
 - i. If someone were to ask you what are the most compelling...or most memorable stories in the Bible, how would you answer?
 - ii. What are some of the symbols of those stories?
 - b. Baptism liturgy handout
5. Some of the water / baptism layers
 - a. Creation – Genesis 1:1-2
 - i. How does our baptism allude/connect to the Creation story?

- Watery womb – birth of something from nothing
Remember “Mikveh” waters known as the
“womb of the world”
- Divine initiative – How does G-d create?
 1. by a-mar...speaking
 2. G-d speaks into existence – takes the
initiating action
- Movement from dark to light – baptism of
repentance – “I once was lost but now I see”
- Divine breathed life – Combination of the water
and the breath (Spirit–wind) the Ruach
(connection to HS)
- Methodist liturgy of baptism – “When nothing
existed but chaos, you swept across the dark
waters and brought forth light.”

b. The Flood – Genesis 7 & 8

i. How does our baptism allude/connect to Noah’s story?

- We are delivered through the deluge...we
should drown but G-d saves us
- Wind power – again we see deliverance through
water as empowered by the wind / breath /
ruach / HS (Gen 8:1)

- Sole survivors - the end result of the flood is that it creates and gives identity to the faithful...these are my people
- G-d invites the survivors to partner in the new creation...we are not baptized to simply become a “child of one day” we mature, we grow into the faith into which we have been rescued...we partner with G-d to work in the Kingdom.
- I Peter 3:19-22
He went and proclaimed God’s salvation to earlier generations who ended up in the prison of judgment because they wouldn’t listen. You know, even though God waited patiently all the days that Noah built his ship, only a few were saved then, eight to be exact—saved from the water by the water. The waters of baptism do that for you, not by washing away dirt from your skin but by presenting you through Jesus’ resurrection before God with a clear conscience. Jesus has the last word on everything and everyone, from angels to armies. He’s standing right alongside God, and what he says goes.
- Methodist liturgy of baptism – “In the days of Noah you saved those on the ark through water.”

c. The Exodus – 14:21, 29-30

i. How does our baptism allude/connect to the Exodus story?

- Watery tomb – death
 1. There is a crossing of death’s boundary...G-d’s people (Exodus or Baptized) find themselves in the place where they should perish. We

should die/drown but we are delivered through the water by G-d.

2. What substitutes for their death?...for ours? (Passover lambs, Pharaoh's army, Yeshua)

- Wind power again! (Exodus 14:21)

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea and GOD, with a terrific east wind all night long, made the sea go back. He made the sea dry ground. The seawaters split.

- Moved into a new identity – from slaves to the people of G-d

They went into the sea Egyptian slaves and came out on the other side with a different identity...even if they did not fully claim it...again, we grow into that which we have been delivered

1. What awaits them on the other side?...awaits us?

(A Feast, a Mediator, Yeshua, HS)

- I Corinthians 10:1-2

Remember our history, friends, and be warned. All our ancestors were led by the providential Cloud and taken miraculously through the Sea. They went through the waters, in a baptism like ours, as Moses led them from enslaving death to salvation life.

- Methodist liturgy of baptism – “When you saw your people as slaves in Egypt, you led them to freedom through the sea.”

d. Crossing the Jordan –

i. How does our baptism allude/connect to the River Jordan story?

- G-d calls his people to remember the **STORY** and step into the water. (Joshua 3:7-13)

GOD said to Joshua, “This very day I will begin to make you great in the eyes of all Israel. They’ll see for themselves that I’m with you in the same way that I was with Moses. You will command the priests who are carrying the Chest of the Covenant: ‘When you come to the edge of the Jordan’s waters, stand there on the river bank.’ ”

“When the soles of the feet of the priests carrying the Chest of GOD, Master of all the earth, touch the Jordan’s water, the flow of water will be stopped—the water coming from upstream will pile up in a heap.”

- The concept of “chukkim” seems to be at work...act on faith and trust in the LORD...first we do...then we gain understanding.
- The founding of a nation...G-d dispossesses the nations (Canaanites, Hittites, Hivites, Perizzites, Girgashites, Amorites, and Jebusites) and founds his “peoplehood”.

Yet another affirmation of their identity.

- Methodist liturgy of baptism – “Their children you brought through the Jordan to the land which you promised.”

e. The Prophets

i. Isaiah 43:1-2

But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be

with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

ii. Chapters 32 & 35 of Isaiah describe the pouring out of a Spirit that will make the desert blossom

iii. Chapter 53 of Isaiah – Prophecy of Christ – describes one whose being—cut off from the Land of the living—will “Sprinkle the Nations”.

- “cut off from the Land of the living” – the covenant of Abraham.

- Genesis 15 – blood path – do to me what we do to these animals (cut off from the land of the living)

- Genesis 17 – covenant of circumcision – any uncircumcised male will be cut off from his people

- Genesis 22 – command to sacrifice Isaac – given a stay of execution - substitute sacrifice

- A covenant that both Moses (Deut. 10:16) and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 4:4) prayed people would grasp—circumcising their hearts

- (Prophecy of a new covenant) – Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their

God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

- **Ezekiel 36:24-27**

I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

- **Colossians 2:11-13**

In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

While these selected texts are only a partial representation, we can still see a divine layering and movement of understanding of covenant. The people of G-d develop through his grace and provision into those who can receive a new revelation of covenant...just as G-d took both roles in the blood path...it is G-d in flesh (Yeshua) that takes the punishment on the cross...and it is into his baptism that we die and are raised to life.

Thus, for our final story, we return to the River Jordan

f. The Baptism of Christ – (Meyers Scale)

i. Christ's baptism connects all the stories and prophecies and invites us to join in that baptism.

- We are offered a new identity and a new

covenant

- We behold the watery womb and the watery tomb
- We are called to the water and invited to partner in a new creation
- We are founded as G-d's people
- The LORD takes the initiative and the obedience
- The Divine Breath / Wind / Ruach / HS once again!

iii. Methodist liturgy of baptism – “In the fullness of time you sent Jesus nurtured in the water of a womb. He was baptized by John and anointed by your Spirit. He called his disciples to share in the baptism of his death and resurrection and to make disciples of all nations.”

iv. Titus 3:3-7

For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, despicable, hating one another. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

WEEK THREE

1. Prayer
2. Review / outline – where we are going (maybe)
3. The Commission – Matt. 28:18-20

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

4. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* clip – “Becoming Greek”
 - a. Questions for class
 - i. What appeals / speaks to you the most about what you just saw?
 - ii. What bothered you about what you just saw?
 - iii. Did that scene seem consistent in any way with what we have discussed together in the past two weeks? Did it seem inconsistent?
5. An **extremely** condensed, **high-altitude** overview of baptism through the history of G-d’s people, (Church history).
 - a. “The Early Church” misnomer → “Early Churches”
 - i. At least 11 distinct sects of Judaism during the 1st century

- ii. New and distinct “Christian” communities popping up as fast as the movement could spread
 - iii. In spite of the “Council of Jerusalem” (Acts 15 – 50AD) the Apostles were learning as they went...(i.e. Peter & Cornelius)
- b. Early Churches video clip – Ancient Ways, Future Paths
- i. What these scholars describe seems to honor both the Hebraic root and the Scriptural depth that we discussed the last few weeks
 - ...tying baptism to creation (birth)
 - ...the flood and the Exodus (death)
 - ...the mikveh waters (cleansing)
 - ...in the name of the Triune and/or in the name of Yeshua
 - ii. Varying modes and varying ages
 - iii. Our sources for this information – see handout
 - ...The Didache
 - ...New Testament – many references:
 - Acts 8:26-39 (Phillip & Ethiopian Eunuch)
 - Acts 11:14 (Cornelius – whole household)
 - Acts 16:5 (Lydia – household)
 - Acts 16:33 (Philippian jailer – household)
 - 1 Cor. 1:16 (Stephanas – household)

While some detractors of infant baptism may argue that the references to whole households being baptized do not directly prove the practice of infant baptism, such a stance underestimates “the whole solidarity of the family in the ancient world.”⁷⁰ In his article “Infant Baptism and

⁷⁰ Michael Green, *Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice and Power* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987) 69.

the Boundaries of Christian Fellowship,” Ralph K. Hawkins references Michael Green’s assertions in *Baptism: Its Purpose, Practice and Power*.

He suggests that contemporary readers have become so infatuated with individualism that they fail to understand the solidarity of the family. In the ancient world, he explains, the head of the family acted for the whole family. ‘The conversion and baptism of the father are grounds for the baptism of all that are in his household, so strong is the solidarity of the family. It brings them all within the covenant.’ He suggests that this solidarity of family may be the decisive consideration in the matter of infant baptism.⁷¹

...The Apostolic Fathers – those who had personal contact with the 12 disciples:

Clement of Rome

Ignatius of Antioch

Polycarp of Smyrna* (69 – 155)

*disciple of John the Apostle...written that John ordained him Bishop of Smyrna.

...Early Church Fathers & Writers:

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lugdunum* (2nd Cent.)

Origen of Alexandria (184 – 253)**

*listened to the teachings of Polycarp...provides the first clear reference to infant baptism at the end of the second century

**In his commentary on Romans writes “The church received a tradition from the apostles to administer baptism, even to infants.”⁷²

c. Later Patristic - Medieval

⁷¹ Hawkins, “Infant Baptism and the Boundaries of Christian Fellowship,” *Stone-Campbell Journal*, 49-68.

⁷² Brand, “Baptism and Communion of Infants: A Lutheran View,” *Living Water, Sealing Spirit*, 354.

i. The impact of Constantine

...nationalization of the faith led to an influx of new believers

...as masses converted, there was a need to educate them

...the overwhelming migration led to a feeling of responsibility to preserve the tenets of the faith

ii. Faith communities began to move toward lengthy and demanding catechetical processes (to sound down – into the ears) teaching

iii. This “preserving” move also migrated the faith away from its oral tradition into a written tradition

...Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430) – see handout

iv. The split begins...East / West...finished in 1054
(SEE HANDOUT QUOTE)

...Roman Catholic Catechism on Baptism:

- The essential rite of Baptism consists in immersing the candidate in water or pouring water on his head, while pronouncing the invocation of the Most Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- Baptism is the first and chief sacrament of forgiveness of sins because it unites us with Christ, who died for our sins and rose for our justification, so that “we too might walk in newness of life.”
- Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit, and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through

Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission: “Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water and in the word.”⁷³

- **Movement to a divided initiation** - Christian initiation is accomplished by three sacraments together: Baptism which is the beginning of new life; Confirmation which is its strengthening; and the Eucharist which nourishes the disciple with Christ’s Body and Blood for his transformation in Christ.

(VIDEO CLIP)

d. Reformation

i. Martin Luther – 1517 – 95 Thesis

- Ex opere operato “it works the work” Dr. John Warwick Montgomery
 “Luther’s actual objection to the church of his day was that it had become an end in itself, and no longer a means to an end. Luther’s real objection was that the church had become sacramentalistic, that is to say, people went to church feeling that if they took part in the prescribed sacramental rituals, in some automatic fashion their problem of God-relationship would be taken care of for them. They regarded the sacramental rites ex opere operato, as works having power already inherent in them – as virtually automatic means of salvation.”⁷⁴
- Infant Baptism – Defended by Luther as Apostolic tradition
(SEE HANDOUT QUOTE)
 “Another thing to consider in trying to

⁷³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church with Modifications from the Editio Typica*, 350.

⁷⁴ Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of Church*.

understand Luther's position is that he believed that if baptism were limited to adults, Satan would undermine the promise it was intended to convey by claiming that people had to perform certain works in order to make themselves worthy of it. The following statement gives his exact words."⁷⁵

ii. John Calvin – Book 4 – Chs. 15 & 16 of the Institutes (1536)

(SEE HANDOUT QUOTE)

“Now, if we are to investigate whether or not baptism is justly given to infants, will we not say that the man trifles, or rather is delirious, who would stop short at the element of water, and the external observance, and not allow his mind to rise to the spiritual mystery? If reason is listened to, it will undoubtedly appear that baptism is properly administered to infants as a thing due to them. The Lord did not anciently bestow circumcision upon them without making them partakers of all the things signified by circumcision.”⁷⁶

iii. Anabaptists – “one who baptizes over again”

- Modern descendants are Mennonites, Amish, Brethren
- Heavily persecuted by Catholics & Protestants
 - o Group led by Zwingli even executed

⁷⁵ Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of Church*

⁷⁶ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, “The External Means or Aids by Which God Invites Us Into the Society of Christ and Holds Us Therein”.

Anabaptists

iii. John Wesley – “Treatise on Baptism: 1756”

(SEE SLIDE & HANDOUT QUOTES)

(VIDEO CLIP)

e. Restoration Movement – Stone & Campbell

i. Barton Stone–1801–Cane Ridge Revival– Kentucky-
“Christians”

ii. Thomas Campbell–1809–Christian Association–
Pennsylvania (baptized as an infant – Presbyterian)

- Their movements merged in 1832
- Birthed...
 - o The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
 - o The Church of Christ
 - o Christian churches

f. The Present Church-es – where are we now?

i. Last week’s slide regarding Christ’s baptism

- unification of all stories
- where we are unified now...where we are not

g. Discussion

WEEK FOUR

1. Prayer

2. Surveys / Review / outline – where we have been

3. Born From Above – John 3:1-8

There was a man of the Pharisee sect, Nicodemus, a prominent leader among the Jews. Late one night he visited Jesus and said, “Rabbi, we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God-pointing, God-revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it.”

Jesus said, “You’re absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above, it’s not possible to see what I’m pointing to—to God’s kingdom.”

“How can anyone,” said Nicodemus, “be born who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter your mother’s womb and be born again. What are you saying with this ‘born-from-above’ talk?”

Jesus said, “You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation—the ‘wind-hovering-over-the-water’ creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it’s not possible to enter God’s kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within is formed by something you can’t see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit.

“So don’t be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be ‘born from above’—out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it’s headed next. That’s the way it is with everyone ‘born from above’ by the wind of God, the Spirit of God.”

4. *Ancient Ways, Future Paths* clip – “Baptism? If we have time.”

5. Discussion set-up – invitation to theologize

- seminary: thoughts and speech about G-d or the ultimate reality
- Willard: a dog watching a game of chess – helpful reminder of posture
- a. Dietrich Bonhoffer – theological plea that “Who?” should be more important than “How?” ...meaning “Who do we say that G-d is and who are we called to be in relation to this G-d?”

- Our western minds tend to see our faith as a means to end
 - Meaning it only has value if it offers practical solutions to real problems
 - James Torrance points out that we usually start with the problem and work backwards through our faith...real problems, urgent problems...violence, poverty, exclusion, injustice
- Torrance story:

(see handout)

Professor Geoffrey Bromiley told me how one day, standing in the mountains of the Sierra Nevada in California, high above Yosemite Valley, he was gazing at the beauty of the scene—cascading waterfalls, the gigantic sequoia redwood trees, the lake below—when someone beside him exclaimed: “Do you know, if they put a dam down there, they could flood this valley and irrigate the farms of central California!” This person was preoccupied with the question of how to find enough water to meet human needs! It shows the pragmatism of our culture, which evaluates our world in terms of utility, means and ends, two totally different apperceptions. The one saw beauty and the other only utility.

So it can be in the world of theology. We can be so preoccupied with the problems of humanity, of society, of individual need or the problems of the self, that we see the Gospel exclusively in terms of these issues. We adopt an anthropological starting point, and then seek to justify religion in terms of its pragmatic value or relevance for our contemporary self-understanding—offering programs, structures, organizations, machinery to deal with these

problems and the countless calls for action. It is as though by doing something, becoming more efficient, we will be successful and find solutions.⁷⁷

b. Questions of importance, mode, method – **staying away from age**

i. How would you describe the G-d that is revealed in baptism?

What consistencies do we see in the Mikveh waters, the layers of Scriptural story, and the faithful efforts of G-d's people engaging baptism for the last 2,000 years?

ii. Does our embrace and engagement of baptism reveal this G-d?

How do the level of importance we place on baptism and our method of baptism honor what we have been given by G-d, by our Hebraic root, by our Christian forebears?

iii. What aspects of our expression of baptism could we better develop or grow?

Craig A Satterlee – example
(see handout)

The first thing we needed to do to get ready for baptism was to find our baptismal font. It wasn't actually lost. Rather, our baptismal font had fallen into a state of disuse. It was tucked away in a corner of the chancel, the part of the church near the altar, like a revered relic we used once upon a time rather than a focal point of our worship space. We moved the font

⁷⁷ Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, 70.

halfway down the center aisle so that everyone could turn and have a good view of the baptism and to suggest that God surrounds the child being baptized with the love and support of the Christian community.⁷⁸

6. *Ancient Ways, Future Paths* clip – “Modern, Protestant infant baptism”

a. Questions of infant baptism

- i. How does infant baptism honor or dishonor the Hebraic root of Mikveh?
- ii. How does infant baptism honor or dishonor the layered Scriptural story?
- iii. How does infant baptism honor or dishonor the history of the faithful?
- iv. How does infant baptism honor or dishonor our culture and context?

6. Remaining questions

a. “Baptism of repentance” vs. “Baptism of the Spirit”

i. The misnomer of the “other” baptism

...Scriptural evidence shows the Spirit is always involved

...distinction of “other” baptism by Spirit develops out of mid 19th Century Holiness movement and the Early 20th Century Pentecostal movement
(see handout)

⁷⁸ Satterlee, *When God Speaks Through Worship*, 40.

...as such, are our baptisms pointing to the work of the Spirit?

b. Communal understanding of baptism

i. It is inconsistent with our Hebraic root, the Scriptural layering and the historical understanding we have been given to view baptism as a personal and private act.

...no such thing as a personal relationship with Jesus

...our faith is a communal faith...community is not optional

...our G-d is Triune...perichoresis...existing in community

...as such, are our baptisms conveying that truth?
(see handout)

7. Conclusion...an invitation

...to move from observation and toward participation
-we remember our baptisms and live into our new identities

...to move from history and toward memory
-the waters of Mikveh are ours
-the stories of the Scripture and the Church are our stories

...to move from personal and toward communal
-we belong together within the perichoretic dance

...to move from exclusion and toward embrace
-the cruciform life is a life of open arms

...to move from the shore and toward the deep
-the security of the shore is an illusion anyway...our place is
in the water with Christ

APPENDIX 4
CLASS SURVEYS

P R E - S T U D Y S U R V E Y

Please take a moment to offer your insight regarding baptism. There are no wrong answers and these surveys are anonymous. The hope is that by sharing our experiences and understanding communally, we all receive greater clarity and a deeper level of knowing that we could not achieve on our own.

1. Why do we baptize?

2. How would you describe baptism to someone who had no knowledge or experience of baptism?

3. What is the correct expression or method of baptism? What should the sacrament include?

4. What biblical stories do you connect to or associate with baptism?

5. How would you describe the baptism of the Holy Spirit?

6. How would you like to see the sacrament of baptism expressed and understood in our community?

7. What questions do you have about baptism?

P O S T - S T U D Y S U R V E Y

Please take a moment to offer your insight regarding baptism. There are no wrong answers and these surveys are anonymous. The hope is that by sharing our experiences and understanding communally, we all receive greater clarity and a deeper level of knowing that we could not achieve on our own.

1. How have your thoughts or ideas changed as to why we baptize?

2. How would you describe baptism to someone who had no knowledge or experience of baptism?

3. How have your thoughts or ideas changed regarding the correct expression or method of baptism?

4. What biblical stories do you connect to or associate with baptism that you did not before the class?

5. How would you describe the role of the Holy Spirit in baptism?

6. Based on our discussions in this class, what changes (if any) would you like to see in AHUMC baptisms?

7. What questions about baptism did this class fail to address?

APPENDIX 5
CLASS MULTIMEDIA PRESENTATION