

It's only water

The ritual of baptism and the formation of Christian identity

Irma Fast Dueck

Imagine a long line of people snaking their way up the river bank. They've left their homes, their cities and towns, some of them coming from a distance. Some families are travelling with kids in tow. Old folks are hanging on to the arms of their grown children. They are women and men of all shapes and sizes, lining up for all sorts of reasons.

For some, the river is the culmination of a journey. Others have given themselves in complete devotion to God. Some are there because someone else dragged them along—and after all, everyone else is doing it. Still others are wondering, struggling, not sure, but hoping the water might somehow change them. Some are half embarrassed, knowing that others are saying, “What is he doing there?” They don't quite know the answer, but still, here they are. And some know the water connects them to their ancestors who crossed the Red Sea long ago and found themselves on a path toward a place of promise. These people want to be on that path, too.

And there is Jesus, walking alongside all these people. And John the Baptist, the guy with no fashion sense, whose breath smells of sweet insects, baptizes them all—Jesus right along with the others.

But it's just water. The Jordan is an unremarkable river, by all accounts. People who have seen it comment on how underwhelming this modest body of water is. Dirty. A place where people wash clothes and bodies, where they water cattle. Who knows what all is in that water? It is just water—an ordinary river that becomes the place for an extraordinary act.

A defining act

It's just water. The potluck is finished; the kids, restless, have gone to the rec room to play Reformation Idol, the new game that's all

the rage. And the adults can't stop talking about the book they've all been reading for the first time and can't get enough of. It's a book that has captured their imagination so much that George asks Conrad whether he would pour water on him. And then Conrad asks to have water poured on his head. And then Felix, and then the others.¹ And the water keeps pouring down. And all the folks gathered in that living room experience new life in that water—though this very act of pouring water will eventually lead some of them to a watery death, their martyrdom. But it's only water.

It's only water. The service starts a bit late. People are still shuffling in after the call to worship. The sanctuary is packed.

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couple of months. A motley group—youth who have grown up in the church; a university student who just wants to be sure; a couple of folks who stumbled into the Mennonite church, having never experienced church before this year; a mother in her late forties, new to all things Christian, looking for a community of belonging. And there's Emma, a vibrant young woman with Down syndrome.

Songs are sung, scripture is read, testimonies are shared, prayers are prayed, and the water jug is brought forward. Water is poured generously over the heads of the acolytes. Tears form in the eyes of the watching congregants. And Emma, beaming, takes her seat within the congregation, proudly wearing the white towel wrapped around her shoulders, a gift given by a deacon on this occasion. Now tears are flowing. But it is just water.

At its roots baptism is the practice that brings us into the Christian community. According to the New Testament accounts of the beginnings of the church, Jesus commanded his followers to baptize new disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. In the history of Christianity, pouring water in the name of the Trinity has been a defining act. How do you know if someone is Christian? Is she baptized? Baptism has always been a rite of passage into the Christian faith.

Is baptism necessary?

As a teacher at Canadian Mennonite University I've been struck by the fact that many students consider themselves Christians, are committed to walking the path of Christ, and are active in their churches—yet are not baptized. Some remain unbaptized for reasons having to do with the many transitions common to contemporary young adult life. For other students the resistance to being baptized has more to do with the connection between baptism and church membership. Some of these youth see the church as an institution; in the absence of a compelling vision of Christian faith and life that is tied to the church, they see no reason to join. Other youth lack an understanding of the significance of rituals and symbolic acts. If it's only water, if it's just a symbol, then why is it important? The argument goes something like this: Why do I need to be baptized to be a Christian? I can participate in most aspects of the life of the church, including, in many congregations, communion. Baptism doesn't make me more or less Christian. Why is it necessary?

I find these young adults' responses disheartening but not surprising. The disinterest in baptism may reveal a lack of ritual

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sensibility with roots as much in their parents' generation (and perhaps previous generations) as among these children of the baby boomers. The reasons for this lack are various: some may assume that the rites and rituals of the church belong to less mature stages of human development, destined to become obsolete as reason and rationality triumph. Perhaps people are critical because believers have sometimes supposed that the rites of the church function magically; a kind of idolatry attaches to trust in performance of

the rite itself rather than in the God who is at work in it. Or perhaps the way the church engages in ritual fails to capture the theological imagination of those observing the practice. Whatever the reason, many of those who practice believers baptism are left to try to sustain meaningful baptismal practices against such limited or distorted understandings of ritual. If it is just water, why is it so important?

Water's mystery

The ordinances or sacraments are gifts given to the church. They are human actions through which God acts. When we participate in baptism, things happen that we do not fully understand. Ironically, this is one of the first gifts of the ordinances: they operate at the boundaries of our understanding. In baptism, as in all the ordinances, there is a mystery. For some, baptism is a mystery that needs to be broken apart in order to figure out how it works; only then is it put back together. But to dissect it is to miss the gift of baptism that reminds us that we do not know—nor will we ever fully understand—God's working in the world.

All sacraments and all worship invite us to relinquish control, to let go of our compulsion to manipulate and master. Worship asks us to allow God to move us into holy presence. Rituals such as baptism are participatory experiences that enable believers to move from concrete reality, in which water is just water, to another reality, in which water carries the believer into a world hidden beyond the world of facts and rationality and beyond a linear understanding of time. In baptism, believers are submerged in the reality of God and in the new creation; they are immersed in the grace, love, and mystery of God.

Water binds us

Among the other gifts baptism as a rite of the church offers us is the unique ability such rituals have to create community and foster connectedness. In the service of baptism, as in communion, we experience community both as participants and as observers. Rituals offer a sense of solidarity and unity with one other that transcends differences. Theologically, baptism has been understood as the rite of initiation into the Christian faith and into the body of Christ, the church.

But the act of baptism connects us not only to one another in the congregation of the church but also to our past and our future. Baptism reminds us of “the big here and long now,” a phrase coined by musician Brian Eno. We live in a time, according to Eno, when the cultural tendency is to live only in the moment and in the place immediately around us; we don't move far out of comfort zones and seldom think too far ahead or too far back. Eno describes this as living in a “small here” and in the

“short now.” We see this phenomenon everywhere: in environmental short-sightedness that takes account only of our immediate needs and wants, or in iPods (“me-Pods,” as some cynically call them) that shut us off from what is going around us, reducing our here and our now to the dimensions of a tiny tech gadget.² The small here and short now are also evident in the church, when baptism becomes a personal decision enacted in a moment, without regard for its communal dimensions and its potential to give shape to a way of life.

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By contrast, the long now recognizes that the moment we live in grows out of the past and is a seed for the future. The longer our sense of *now*, the more past and future it includes. When we participate in baptism we can locate ourselves in a long now and a big here. We can bind ourselves not only to our immediate communities but also to global ones and those of centuries past, to the baptism of Jesus and his followers in the early church who baptized and made disciples. And we attach ourselves to Conrad Grebel and George Blaurock and Felix Manz. And we join ourselves to one another—yes, even to those we don’t know or even like. They all become our brothers and sisters. And our baptism connects us to a future in which in Christ we are all made one.

Water drowns us

In baptism we discover our identity in Christ. One of the most common ways of speaking about baptism in the New Testament, particularly in Paul’s letters, is as death or drowning. In baptism we die to old definitions of ourselves and rise to discover our identity in Christ. Paul writes to the Colossians, “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. And when you were dead . . . , God made you alive together with him” (Col. 2:12–13; NRSV). And he tells the Corinthians, “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Cor. 5:17). And to the Galatians Paul says, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew

or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27–28).

In Christ through baptism a new creation is emerging in which inherited social definitions are no longer basic. In baptism the believer dies to those definitions and rises to a new one. Baptism is that entry into the new people, the new creation, the new world. It was for the early church the distinguishing mark of this people, and it transcended previous definitions, such as those that separated Jews and Gentiles. It marks a new kind of social relationship, a unity that overarches our differences and separations and creates a new reconciled community in Christ.

But it's only water

The rituals of the church tell a story about what Christians believe about faith and the meaning of life, even if we're not fully aware

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that they are doing so. Baptism is no exception. The church's rituals are critical in helping Christians maintain their identity as followers of Jesus. Anthropologist Mary Douglas studied various cultures for years, particularly minority cultures living within larger dominant cultures. She discovered that as these minority cultures lost their rituals, they lost their cultural identity and were soon subsumed into the dominant culture. This research is instructive for Christians who seek to nurture and sustain a distinctive identity as

Christian people in the midst of broader—dominant—cultural identities.³

The early Anabaptists were careful to make sure the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper were kept in proper perspective. Anabaptist theologies of the sacraments and of worship were, for the most part, formulated in reaction to the medieval Roman Catholic Church and the Magisterial Reformation. In these traditions the definitive characteristic was God's initiative. The Anabaptists emphasized the human response of faith and love. Simply put, they were more interested in the nature of the human action within the sacrament than with the sacrament itself. Water was just water; bread was just bread.

If water doesn't make a difference, then why baptize? Because we need the waters of baptism. The Anabaptists were ardent in emphasizing salvation by grace through faith and not by sacramental mediation. But while the waters of baptism do not save us, they do locate us, reminding us who we are and what is required of us.

For some reason, many of us who practice believers baptism see baptism as an isolated event rather than as an opening into a way of life or a pattern for Christian formation. Yet as the rich symbolism of the water of baptism reminds us, it is God who mysteriously and continually washes us, regenerating, initiating, calling us into relationship. We are not our own saviours, nor are we masters of our own destinies. When we are baptized in Christ, we not only become connected to one another in our congregations, but we also find ourselves part of a larger story that binds us with Christians who have gone before and provides a vision for reconciliation as we move forward. We spend our lives learning to respond faithfully to the gift of baptismal identity in Christ. The dying of baptism continues to surround us as we learn what it means to live as Christ's body, a new creation. Yes, it is only water, but it ushers us into a way of life.

Notes

¹ The January 21, 1525, baptism of George Blaurock, a former priest, by Conrad Grebel, in the home of Felix Manz, is one of the defining moments of early Anabaptism, marking a beginning of the radical reformation and the Anabaptist movement.

² Brian Eno, "The Big Here and Long Now," <http://longnow.org/essays/big-here-long-now/>.

³ See Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973).

About the author

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