

# Let's have a party!

## A baptismal sermon, with some reflections

Gareth Brandt

### **A** baptismal sermon

Luke 15 records three parables, about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son. Each parable ends with a party: the shepherd's friends rejoice in his recovered sheep; the woman who finds her coin invites her neighbors in to share her happiness; and when the son returns, his father orders up the best clothes and finest meat, and the dancing begins.

But what if the shepherd had invited his neighbors and then lectured them on how to avoid losing sheep? What if the woman who found the lost coin had warned her friends about being careless with money? Suppose the father had greeted his prodigal son with "I told you you'd be back. If you had listened to me, you would have saved us all a lot of agony. I hope you've learned your lesson. If you plan to live in this household, you'll have to abide by the rules. Now hop to it. There's work to be done around here." These responses may seem reasonable, but according to Jesus' stories, our Sovereign has a different character, and things are otherwise in the commonwealth of God.

Today twelve people are publicly announcing their repentance and their commitment to Jesus. The angels must be going wild! And if they are partying, we on earth should reflect heaven's revelry. Today we too celebrate that what was lost is found, that those who could be squandering their inheritance in the world have instead chosen to come home to the family of God.

You may find the idea of parties offensive—all that eating, drinking, dancing. So did the Pharisees. In fact, their straitlaced response to Jesus is what elicited this series of parables. Jesus had gained a reputation as a party animal, and these good religious people accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard. These parables respond directly to their criticism. Jesus reminds them, in effect, that the kingdom of God is a party!<sup>1</sup>

“Just wait a minute here,” you say. “What about the practical and ethical side of living out the Christian life? Life is not just one big party.” No, it isn’t, but there is a time to celebrate. The Christian life involves a serious commitment to daily discipleship, but we are meant to live it in a spirit of joy and freedom. When a woman anointed Jesus with a jar of expensive perfume, her extravagance offended some. Jesus honored it. He didn’t deny the importance of care for the poor and good stewardship, but he also made time to pause in worship and adoration. And today is such a time. In the midst of daily struggles and worldwide suffering, we need interludes of celebration to bring relief and restore joy. We will have time again to preach and teach, serve and work, but today is a day to party.

This party is for everyone. All are invited and included, without discrimination: Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. Each one baptized today is different from the others, but all are baptized into one body. Categories are irrelevant at a Christian party. Everyone gets to participate.

Baptism expresses an individual commitment and displays outwardly the inner transformation that has been taking place in the lives of these people before us. Baptism also joins each one to the partying people of God. It is the rite of initiation into a new family, into a new relationship with others. Paul Pierson writes, “Jesus did not come to save disembodied souls or merely to form a conglomeration of redeemed individuals, each primarily concerned with their own salvation and needs.”<sup>2</sup> He came to form a new humanity whose pattern of life is described in the New Testament. This new humanity is called the church.

The church is not perfect. It is made up of imperfect people. But that is part of its beauty. The twelve of you are a motley crew, as were the original twelve disciples. You have different personalities, ages, and backgrounds, and yet you are making the same commitment to live in the way of Jesus and to join yourself with each other and this congregation. In your uniqueness you are invited and accepted here. Together we are like parts of the body, all different, with different functions, but working together as one.

Today the twelve of you are publicly identifying yourself with this body, this new humanity, this faith community and spiritual family. We are gathered as a community of friends, neighbors, and

relatives to rejoice with you in your new commitments. And be assured that the party down here is only an echo of what's going on up there. Today we taste just a bit of what we will someday enjoy in the presence of God and the angels, forever.

We welcome you with the love of Jesus. His love binds us together and makes us one. It brings healing and hope to the world and glory to God. May the party here today spill over into your lives every day as you bring joy and love to the places and people on your path. Amen.

### **Reflections on baptism in postmodern experience**

**Baptism as a sign of belonging.** Enlightenment philosopher René Descartes' maxim, "I think; therefore I am," trumpets modernism's

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emphasis on the individual. Evangelical theology has often followed the lead of this individualistic philosophy by emphasizing a me-and-Jesus view of the Christian life. Modernity's individualism has left young people growing up in a postmodern milieu with an awareness of their profound disconnectedness from others.

Emerging generations, raised in a fragmenting culture, have a deep need for a sense of rootedness, of belonging in a community.<sup>3</sup> They yearn for meaningful relationships and significant human connections. The lyrics of a top rock hit of 2003 illustrate this desire:

*I want to heal  
I want to feel like I'm close to something real  
I want to find something I've wanted all along  
Somewhere I belong<sup>4</sup>*

Postmodernism has alerted us anew to the value of community. Many youth feel alienated and lost. "I belong; therefore I am" is a truer statement of meaningful identity today.

Baptism should invite youth into a community of belonging. I believe that Anabaptist/Mennonite theology and practice scratch where the emerging generations are itching. Since the sixteenth

century, Mennonites have valued a theology and practice of community. We have seen water baptism as crucial in establishing the visible body of Christ on earth, as marking a public commitment to the church as well as to God.<sup>5</sup> A recent study conference on baptism and church membership asked whether baptism and church membership should be separated.<sup>6</sup> Absolutely not! This question would have been inconceivable to Paul and the early church.<sup>7</sup> Belonging was an essential part of early church catechetical practice.<sup>8</sup> For postmodern youth, identity comes from belonging, and baptism is about a new identity in a new community of belonging.

The local church can offer a physically and spiritually safe place of connection for which alienated postmodern youth are longing. Baptism is the initiation rite into a new family, into a new relationship with others, into a new community of belonging. When youth and young adults are baptized, they become part of a unique intergenerational community that looks out for them. This care is especially meaningful for young people who do not have biological family ties in a congregation. It gives them “somewhere to belong.” The best way to help youth grow in their faith is to facilitate their membership in a community of faith through the sign of baptism. It is a symbol of covenant in two inseparable dimensions: a mysterious vertical dimension and an earthy, practical, tangible, horizontal dimension.

***Baptism as a party.*** Experience is also high on the list of postmodern cultural values. For something to be true—authentic and real—spiritually, it must be experienced bodily and emotionally as well as intellectually. “Truth happens.”<sup>9</sup> The ritual of baptism should be an experience of celebration and inclusion. It is a party. The symbol, the ritual, although not seen as magically or mechanistically efficacious, is imbued with significance and emotion.

Emerging generations, steeped in postmodern culture, place high value on religious symbols of various kinds, seeing significance, sacredness, and power in them. They display a trend toward more liturgical and symbolic forms of worship. Symbols, rituals, icons, movements, smells, and other sensory experiences are all part of this experiential encounter with the transcendent.

Ancient forms of worship such as the labyrinth, *lectio divina*, and the use of icons and incense are being rediscovered by the younger generation.<sup>10</sup> Clothing, fashion, and bodily adornments including tattoos, body piercing, and jewelry have had a

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decidedly religious quality of late.<sup>11</sup> Young postmodern scholar Tom Beaudoin calls them *sacramentals* and explains that bodily adornment can be a source of religious meaning. He notes that youth are preoccupied with bodily rituals and symbols “partly because religious institutions today are unable to provide for deeply marking, profoundly experiential encounters.”<sup>12</sup>

How does this valuing of symbols and sensual experiences relate to Mennonite understandings of baptism? Can baptism be a deeply marking, profoundly experiential encounter? Should it be? To move in this direction seems to challenge our tradition’s rejection of the belief that the church’s rites are sacramentally transformative. But in saying that baptism is a mere outward symbol of an inner reality, do we divide too sharply the symbol from its meaning? To deny any connection removes significance from the rite.

Baptism is an important experiential ritual. Michele Hershberger notes that rituals are “important because they are participatory. Youth know, on the one level, that the water used in baptism is just that—water. But unlike their modern counterparts, Postmoderns sense that, in the act of baptism, something does happen that is mysterious and scientifically unexplainable. And without needing to dissect or analyze this mystery, they long to experience it.”<sup>13</sup>

Baptism should be a significant marking experience along the journey of discipleship. The baptism ritual ought to be “more than just a five-minute addendum to the sermon.”<sup>14</sup> It should be a memorable and joyous occasion.

***Baptism as part of a longer journey of discipleship.*** The baptismal event should be seen as a marker on a longer and sometimes difficult journey of faithfulness. Discipleship is a

lifelong pilgrimage. “We are not converted only once in our lives, but many times; and this endless series of large and small conversions, inner revolutions, leads to our transformation in Christ.”<sup>15</sup> The church must not communicate that the faith journey is somehow completed by baptism and church membership.<sup>16</sup>

In the modern corporate western world we wanted everything to be neatly packaged and prescribed, so we created separate packages for conversion and discipleship, with baptism in

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between. The chronological model (evangelize, convert, baptize, disciple) is a reflection of this modern predilection toward linear simplicity. But the separation between conversion and discipleship is artificial, and postmoderns will be suspicious of anything that seeks to define or package the spiritual and the mysterious. “In a postmodern world, the process of making disciples must be seen as more holistic, or at least less quantifiable and more organic.”<sup>17</sup> Evangelism is not a call to a one-time decision of faith but an invitation into a community of journeyers who are daily letting Christ take them in new

directions of faithfulness.<sup>18</sup> Baptism doesn't close a deal; it is a marker on the journey.

Christian formational experiences, whatever labels we give them, are not stand-alone events but part of a process of inward and outward change. Both the early church and the sixteenth-century Anabaptists understood this reality and emphasized the importance of a change in behavior as well as change of belief and belonging.<sup>19</sup> In the early church, demanding formational activities before and after the ritual of baptism were vital parts of the transformational process. The early church doubtless performed its rituals with care, but leaders wrote relatively little about the value of experience.<sup>20</sup> They emphasized transformed living, as did the Anabaptists.<sup>21</sup> The danger in overemphasizing the moment-in-time celebratory experience of baptism is that we will have a church of baptized people who remain socially and ethically unchanged.

## Conclusion

Baptism celebrates belonging in the Christian faith community, a community that is a visible alternative to the prevailing social order. Tony Campolo makes the case for *party* as a new word to describe the kingdom of God, *shalom*, and jubilee, biblical concepts which the average reader or listener may not understand.<sup>22</sup> If *party* is used as a metaphor, not only for the occasion of baptism, but for the infectious and ongoing life of the church, then it may well be an appropriate and inviting image for emerging generations in the postmodern era. “Let’s have a party!” is then an invitation not only to a baptismal celebration but also to a continually transforming individual and congregational life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God Is a Party* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Paul E. Pierson, *Themes from Acts* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Bks., 1982), 39.

<sup>3</sup> This need to belong has been documented in many articles and books, including Kenda Creasy Dean, “The Sacrament of One Another: Fidelity through Holy Friendship,” in *The 1999 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church and Culture* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 2000): 15–32; Patricia Hersch, *A Tribe Apart: A Journey into the Heart of American Adolescence* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1998); Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Cultivating Authentic Community, Creating Holistic Connections* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Hse., 2001), chap. 3; Dawson McAllister, *Saving the Millennial Generation: New Ways to Reach the Kids You Care about in These Uncertain Times* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), chap. 7; and L. David Overholt and James Penner, *Soul Searching the Millennial Generation: Strategies for Youth Workers* (Toronto: Stoddart Publishing, 2002), chap. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Chester Bennington and Mike Shinoda, “Somewhere I Belong,” *Meteora*, Linkin Park (Warner Brothers, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Kitchener, Ont., and Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Pr., 1981), chap. 5, 8; C. Arnold Snyder, *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Pr., 1999), 25–6.

<sup>6</sup> The Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches held a study conference in Winnipeg, Man., 22–24 May 2003. One of the main questions for discussion was whether baptism and church membership should be separated.

<sup>7</sup> Jon Isaak, “Baptism among the Early Christians,” paper presented to Canadian Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches, Winnipeg, Man., 22–24 May 2003, 9; <http://www.mbconf.ca/believe/studyconf/isaak.en.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Pr. International, 1999), 22.

<sup>9</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, “X-Files and Unknown Gods: The Search for Truth with Postmodern Adolescents,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 19 (March 2000): 11.

<sup>10</sup> The plethora of youth and young adult ministry resources being published in this vein recently is evidence of this rediscovery. Some examples include Steven L. Case, *The Book of Uncommon Prayer: Contemplative and Celebratory Prayers and Worship*

*Services for Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Hse., 2002); Tony Jones, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Hse., 2003); Jonny Baker and Steve Collins, *The Prayer Path: A Christ-Centered Labyrinth Experience* (Loveland, Colo.: Group Publishing, Inc., 2001); Amy Simpson, *Diving Deep: Experiencing Jesus through Spiritual Disciplines* (Loveland, Colo.: Group Publishing, Inc., 2001). See also James Martin, "Contemporary Catholics on Traditional Devotions," *America* 188 (3 March 2003), 8–14; and Daniel M. Harrell, "Post-Contemporary Worship," *Leadership* 20 (Spring 1999): 38.

<sup>11</sup> Kevin Heinrichs, "Tattoos No Longer Taboo?" *Christianity Today* 43 (24 May 1999), 17; "Tattoos As Evangelical Chic," *Christian Century* 115 (23–30 December 1998), 1240–1; and Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spirituality of Generation X* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Pubs., 1998), 75–80, 100–1.

<sup>12</sup> Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*, 77–8.

<sup>13</sup> Michele Hershberger, "The Baptism Ritual in a Postmodern World," *Direction* 31 (Fall 2002): 143.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Merton, quoted in Stephen D. Jones, *Faith Shaping: Youth and the Experience of Faith* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Judson Pr., 1987), 27.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen D. Jones, *Faith Shaping*, 67.

<sup>17</sup> Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 155.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen D. Jones, *Faith Shaping*, 27; and Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 133.

<sup>19</sup> Kreider, *Change of Conversion*, 21–2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>21</sup> In modern times this emphasis was articulated best in Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Pr., 1944). An excellent recent publication is J. Nelson Kraybill's *On the Pilgrims' Way: Conversations on Christian Discipleship* (Scottsdale, Pa., and Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Pr., 1999).

<sup>22</sup> Campolo, *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*, 21.

## About the author

Gareth Brandt is professor of youth ministry at Columbia Bible College, Abbotsford, B.C. He has worked with youth for twenty years in social services settings and in congregational and conference ministry. The sermon with which this article begins was preached at a baptismal service on May 5, 1991, at Braeside Evangelical Mennonite Church in Winnipeg, Manitoba.