
Baptismal Spirituality in the Early Church and Its Implications for the Church Today

In an essay entitled “The Sacraments in Wesleyan Perspective,” originally published in 1988, British Methodist liturgical theologian Geoffrey Wainwright says, “Without the heartbeat of the sacraments at its center, a church will lack confidence about the gospel message and about its own ability to proclaim that message in evangelism, to live it out in its own internal fellowship, and to embody it in service to the needy.”¹ And, second, in an essay appearing originally in 1993, “Renewing Worship: The Recovery of Classical Patterns,” he writes that “[a] deeper replunging into its own tradition will, in my judgment, be necessary if the church is to survive in recognizable form, particularly in our western culture.”² The “heartbeat of the

1. G. Wainwright, “The Sacraments in Wesleyan Perspective,” in *Worship with One Accord: Where Liturgy and Ecumenism Embrace*, ed. G. Wainwright (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 106.

2. G. Wainwright, “Renewing Worship: The Recovery of Classical Patterns,” in Wainwright, *Worship with One Accord*, 138.

sacraments” at the very center of the church’s life, and the need for “a deeper replunging into its own tradition,” provide the overall focus for this chapter, that is, looking at the notion of baptismal spirituality in the early Christian churches and its usefulness or implications for the life of the church today. In doing so, I wish to divide my comments into three sections: (1) Not Early Christian Baptismal *Spirituality* but *Spiritualities*; (2) The So-Called Golden Age of the Baptismal Process; and (3) The Implications or Usefulness of This Spirituality for the Church Today.

Not Early Christian Baptismal *Spirituality* but *Spiritualities*

It is often said that if early Christianity had used the later Roman Catholic terminology of *Blessed Sacrament* to refer to any of its sacramental rites, it would have used it to refer to Baptism and not to the Eucharist (a term, by the way, actually used by Luther as early as 1519 to talk about Baptism³). But, of course, what would have been meant by *Baptism* in this early context was not simply the water bath and trinitarian formula, the later Scholastic precision of *matter* and *form*, or even the Reformation language of *water* and the *word*, but would have included the entire catechetical and sacramental-ritual process by which Christians, in the words of Tertullian, were “made, not born,” that foundational and formative experience of church leading, at least in the case of adult converts, from initial conversion and inquiry all the way to full incorporation within the life of the church. That is, this “Blessed Sacrament” of Baptism in early Christianity encompassed what the Lutheran World Federation

3. See “The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35: *Word and Sacrament 1*, ed. by E. T. Bachmann (Philadelphia/St. Louis: Fortress Press and Concordia Publishing House, 1960), 23–44.

Chicago Statement on Worship and Culture: Baptism and Rites of Life Passage describes as

a) formation in the one faith (traditionally known as the catechumenate), b) the water-bath, and c) the incorporation of the baptized into the whole Christian community and its mission. This latter incorporation is expressed by the newly baptized being led to the table of the Lord's Supper, the very table where their baptismal identity will also be strengthened and re-affirmed throughout their life.⁴

Such an all-encompassing view of Baptism and the need for solid formation in the Christian faith brought with it several implications for the day-to-day organization of the church itself. While our evidence is not what we wish it would be for the first three centuries of the Christian era, there is no question but that the way of forming new Christians through this ritual process was the task of the whole church itself, all the way from the agapaic life of the community, especially those whose lives witnessed directly to the gospel in the presence of others, to the various ministries needed throughout the catechumenate and within the celebration of the rites themselves. An early church order, the so-called *Apostolic Tradition*, ascribed to Hippolytus of Rome in the early third century (ca. 215), but which is probably neither apostolic, nor of Hippolytan authorship, nor Roman, nor early third century,⁵ testifies to this variety of people involved in the process, with special roles assigned to sponsors who

4. Lutheran World Federation, *Chicago Statement on Worship and Culture: Baptism and Rites of Life Passage* (Geneva 1998), para. 2.1.

5. For recent studies see Paul F. Bradshaw, Maxwell E. Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); W. Kinzig, C. Marksches, and M. Vinzent, *Tauffragen und Bekenntnis: Studien zur sogenannten 'Traditio Apostolica' zu den 'Interrogationes de fide' und zum 'Römischen Glaubensbekenntnis'* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1999); M. Metzger, "Nouvelles perspectives pour la prétendue *Tradition apostolique*," *Ecclesia Orans* 5 (1988): 241–59; Metzger, "Enquêtes autour de la prétendue *Tradition apostolique*," *Ecclesia Orans* 9 (1992): 7–36; Metzger, "A propos des règlements ecclésiastiques et de la prétendue *Tradition apostolique*," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 66 (1992): 249–61.

present and testify to the worthiness of the baptismal candidates, to lay and ordained catechists, to deacons, presbyters, and the bishop, who, as the chief pastor, had the responsibility of overseeing the entire process and concluded the baptismal rite itself with a hand-laying gesture of pneumatic blessing and paternity, a kiss, and welcome into the eucharistic communion of the church.⁶ Other documents, such as the late first- or early second-century *Didache*, or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, underscore the involvement of the whole community in the prebaptismal fast that would have been undertaken by those preparing for Baptism.⁷ Indeed, the royal priesthood of the faithful signified throughout the baptismal process and into which the neophytes were incorporated was regularly exercised in the eucharistic assembly, as we know already from Justin the Martyr in the mid second-century,⁸ and from the mid third-century Syrian church order, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*,⁹ with various roles for lectors; door keepers; even widows and, possibly, *women* presbyters; cantors; deacons, both male and female; presbyters; and bishops, with the faithful themselves presenting the “gifts” for the Meal and for the poor and offering prayers of intercession for the church and the world. In many ways, the liturgical assembly itself was but the gathering of the church to exercise its common baptismal priesthood before God, in union with the one high priest of the church, Jesus Christ, in the power of his Holy Spirit.

Because of Baptism, that is, the life-shaping direction of the whole baptismal process, it is no wonder that early Christians, especially people like Tertullian and Cyprian in the North African West,

6. Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 82–135.

7. For a text of the *Didache*, see Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 59–130.

8. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 61.

9. S. Brock and M. Vasey, *The Liturgical Portions of the Didascalia*, Grove Liturgical Study 29 (Bramcote/Nottingham: Grove Books, Ltd., 1982).

Gregory Thaumaturgos (the Wonder Worker) in the Syrian East, and Origen of Alexandria in Egypt, struggled with the question of how to treat serious postbaptismal sin (e.g., what is sometimes referred to as the traditional triad of apostasy, adultery, and murder). And it is no wonder that after such “shipwreck” on the rock of postbaptismal sin, the answer given to this problem was nothing other than a “return to Baptism” itself through the process of public and “canonical penance,” a process that mirrored the rigors of the catechumenate itself, and a process understood, in the words of Tertullian, to be a “plank” thrown to the drowning sinner as one more chance, but *only* one more chance, to get it right.¹⁰ If the Eucharist was both the culmination and the ongoing repeatable sacrament of baptismal initiation, then canonical penance was the way of return for the excommunicated, those cut off from eucharistic communion, to the regular sacramental life of the church. Together with catechumens and the “elect,” that is, those in the final stages of baptismal preparation, these penitents would be regularly dismissed with prayer and hand laying from the Sunday assembly after the Liturgy of the Word, and, after a designated time of penance (usually determined according to the gravity of their sin), would be reconciled with Christ and the church through the hand-laying absolution of the bishop, an event that in the later Roman tradition would take place with great solemnity on Holy (“Maundy”) Thursday. Eucharist, penitence, and, indeed, all of ecclesial life in early Christianity seems to have flowed from the all-encompassing catechetical and sacramental-ritual process of Baptism, just as later evidence for early Christian proclamation of the word stems, in large part, from extant pre- and postbaptismal catechetical homilies.

10. Tertullian, *De Poenitentia* 7. On the process of “canonical penance” in early Christianity, see J. Dallen, *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance* (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1986).

Unfortunately, we are not completely certain about the overall *contents* of specific catechetical instruction provided to catechumens within the churches of the first three centuries. From scattered references throughout early Christian writings, however, it is quite clear that some kind of explanation of the Scriptures in relationship to salvation in Christ along with continual ethical or moral formation in the life of the Christian community were essential components of this process. The first six chapters of the *Didache*, for example, describe what is called “The Two Ways,” that of life and death. Significantly, the contents of these first six chapters are not concerned with Christian *doctrine* but focus, instead, on the Ten Commandments and the type of ethical-moral life expected from those who are to be members of Christ through Baptism. Similarly, chapter 20 of the *Apostolic Tradition* refers to an examination of those who have completed the catechumenate and now desire to enter the next stage of the process—“election”—leading more immediately to Baptism. Again, the questions they are asked at this point are not questions about doctrine but about the quality of their lives. Chapter 20 directs,

And when those appointed to receive Baptism are chosen, their life having been examined (if they lived virtuously while they were catechumens and if they honored the widows, and if they visited those who are sick, and if they fulfilled every good work), and when those who brought them in testify on his behalf that he acted thus, then let them hear the gospel.¹¹

We Lutherans tend to become a bit uncomfortable with a process that places so much emphasis upon the moral life and, apparently, so little on doctrine. How, we might ask, can someone seek to become Christian if they haven’t heard or don’t hear the gospel

11. Bradshaw, Johnson, and Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition*, 104.

(cf. Rom. 10:17)? Yet, as recent studies are beginning to show,¹² it is quite possible that in early Christianity, catechumens themselves, as the above text from *Apostolic Tradition* 20 seems to imply, did not “hear,” and, hence, were not even introduced to, the “gospel” or Gospels, until they were elected to the final stage of baptismal preparation. Formation thus had more to do with an apprenticeship in learning to *live* as Christians. And, if we are to believe the standard textbook theory that the regular catechumenate in the pre-Nicene church could last as long as three years in duration, this is a rather long time for “converts” not to be introduced to the very central texts of the Christian tradition. Yet, some remnant of this process may, in fact, be contained in the seventh- or eighth-century *Gelasian Sacramentary*, where, during the third week of Lent, the “elect,” now by this time clearly infants brought by their parents to public catechesis, received the Gospels themselves by means of an extended introduction to each one by a deacon.¹³ While the doctrinal Lutheran in me bristles a bit at this, I wonder if Luther himself didn’t intuit this kind of early Christian baptismal process in the very organization of his *Small Catechism*, where instruction in the meaning of the Ten Commandments comes *first* before everything else and, so, *precedes* that of the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the sacraments.

Nevertheless, if Baptism in early Christianity shaped the whole of Christian life and identity and fostered a “spirituality” or way of life in the Holy Spirit that was ecclesial, ethical, social, and sacramental, the baptismal liturgy, including its eucharistic culmination, as the church’s great “School of Prayer,” also shaped the teaching or doctrine of the church itself. Although true prayer is always a gift

12. See Paul F. Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 2010), 55–68.

13. See E. C. Whitaker, *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (hereafter, *DBL*), rev. and expanded Maxwell E. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 2003), 218–21.

of the Holy Spirit (see Rom. 8:26–27 and Gal. 4:6–7) and cannot adequately be “taught,” the great gift of the church’s liturgical tradition is that it provides both a language and structure *for* prayer. In other words, as early Christianity knew even without written liturgical texts, the way to learn and teach Christian prayer is to learn from the liturgy itself how it is that the church actually prays in its assemblies. Within early Christianity much of this happened simply as the result of the catechumens’ ongoing participation in the liturgical life of the church through the daily public gatherings for what came to be called the Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours and the Sunday eucharistic liturgy. And it is the very structure and contents of this prayer of the church that provided a model for all of Christian prayer, namely, that Christian prayer is “trinitarian” in structure and focus. That is, Christian prayer is addressed *to* God, “our Abba, Father,” *through* Jesus Christ the Son, our great high priest and mediator, *in* the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the Paraclete, the Counselor, who leads us by word and sacrament to confess that Jesus is Lord (see 1 Cor. 12:3). Note, for example, the concluding formula for the Prayer of the Day still in our own worship books: “Through your Son Jesus Christ our Lord who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, both now and forever.” Or, note the concluding doxology at the end of the Great Thanksgiving: “Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, now and forever. Amen.”

Furthermore, an ancient Christian principle, often summarized by the Latin phrase, *lex orandi . . . lex credendi*, states that the “rule of praying establishes the rule of believing.” That is, the faith of the church is both constituted and expressed by the prayer of the church. Indeed, the liturgy is not only the “school for prayer,” but also the “school for faith,” and, as such, serves as a continual formative fitting “text” for all the baptized themselves in their lifelong process of

continual formation in the faith. Long before there was an Apostles' or Nicene Creed, or an explicit "doctrine" of the Trinity, it was through the Prayer of Blessing or Thanksgiving over the baptismal waters, through the candidate's threefold confession of faith in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the context of Baptism itself ("Do you believe in . . . ?" "I believe . . . "), and through the great *eucharistia* over the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper, consisting of *praise* to God for the work of creation and redemption, *thanksgiving* for the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ, and *invocation* of the Holy Spirit, that the church professed its faith in the Trinity by means of *doxology* and *praise*. In other words, it was the *Liturgy*—baptismal and eucharistic—that assisted in forming *orthodox* Christian teaching. That is, orthodox trinitarian and christological doctrine developed, in large part, from the church at prayer, as the baptismal-credal profession of faith gave rise to the official creeds themselves; as prayer to Christ contributed to understanding his *homoousios* with the Father; as the Holy Spirit's *divine* role in Baptism shaped the theology of the Spirit's divinity in Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, and the Council of Constantinople; and even as early devotion to Mary as *Theotokos* gave rise, in part, to the decree of the Council of Ephesus. While *orthodoxy* means "right thinking" or "right opinion," such right thinking developed, at least in part, from the doxology of the church, where several of our central Christian doctrines were prayed liturgically long before they were formalized dogmatically.¹⁴ Indeed, trinitarian faith was born in the font and nurtured and sustained at the table, good enough reason, in my opinion, to be very cautious today of those who would replace the Liturgy with something else in the name of contemporary "relevance" or "hospitality to seekers"

14. See my recent study, *Praying and Believing in Early Christianity: The Interplay between Christian Worship and Doctrine* (Collegetown, MN: Michael Glazier, 2013), where I treat these issues in detail.

or of those who so tinker with classic liturgical formulas that one is left wondering if it is the Triune God of Scripture and the classic tradition who is intended any longer.¹⁵ Careless tinkering with the church's *lex orandi* can have drastic consequences for the church's *lex credendi*.

There is, therefore, not one baptismal spirituality in early Christianity but several complementary baptismal *spiritualities*. In the New Testament itself we are presented with a rich mosaic of baptismal images: forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38); new birth through water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:5; Titus 3:5–7); putting off of the “old nature” and “putting on the new,” that is, “being clothed in the righteousness of Christ” (Gal. 3:27; Col. 3:9–10); initiation into the “one body” of the Christian community (1 Cor. 12:13; see also Acts 2:42); washing, sanctification, and justification in Christ and the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:11); enlightenment (Heb. 6:4; 10:32; 1 Pet. 2:9); being “anointed” and “sealed” by the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 1:21–22; 1 John 2:20, 27); being “sealed” or “marked” as belonging to God and God’s people (2 Cor. 1:21–22; Eph. 1:13–14; 4:30; Rev. 7:3); and, of course, being joined to Christ through participation in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–11; Col. 2:12–15).¹⁶ From this mosaic, two will stand out with particular emphasis in early Christianity: Baptism as new birth through water and the Holy Spirit (John 3:5ff.); and Baptism as being united with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–11). And, as Christianity developed and spread throughout the diverse cultures of the ancient world, the “one baptism” (cf. Eph. 4:5) of the church was expressed by means of a variety of different liturgical practices and interpretations within the distinct Christian

15. Cf. Wainwright, “The Sacraments in Wesleyan Perspective,” 120 and 122.

16. Biblical texts are taken from the *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, National Council of the Churches of Christ, 1989.

churches. For the early Syriac-speaking Christians of East Syria, living in what is modern-day Iraq and Iran, the catechumenate itself was quite minimal, it seems, and the rites themselves *may* have taken place on Epiphany, understood as the great Theophany of Christ in the Jordan, his own baptismal “birth” in the Jordan, a “new birth” rite understood as the means by which the Holy Spirit, through a *prebaptismal* anointing, assimilated the neophyte to the messianic priesthood and kingship of Christ.¹⁷ For the early Greek- and Coptic-speaking Egyptian Christian tradition, known by Clement and Origen of Alexandria, a forty-day prebaptismal catechumenate commencing on Epiphany, again understood as the feast of Jesus’ Baptism, seems to have led to Baptism on the sixth day of the sixth week of this post-Epiphany fast (sometime in mid-February),¹⁸ and the rite itself, again focusing possibly on a prebaptismal anointing, appears to have been understood not in terms of death and resurrection imagery but rather as “crossing the Jordan” with our Joshua-Jesus. For Origen himself the imagery of catechumenate and Baptism had little to do with the paschal language of crossing the Red Sea or death and burial in Christ. Rather, for him, the exodus from Egypt signified entrance into the forty-year catechumenate, and it was the Israelites’ crossing of the Jordan that functioned as the great Old Testament baptismal typology.¹⁹ In fact, within the

17. On this tradition, see especially the work of G. Winkler, “The Original Meaning of the Prebaptismal Anointing and Its Implications,” in *Living Water, Sealing Spirit: Readings on Christian Initiation*, hereafter, *LWSS*, ed. M. Johnson (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1995), 58–81; and the recent study of K. McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1996).

18. On this, see Paul F. Bradshaw and Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Origins of Feasts, Fasts, and Seasons in Early Christianity* (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 2011), 92–108.

19. On Origen’s baptismal theology, see J. Laporte, “Models from Philo in Origen’s Teaching on Original Sin,” in *LWSS*, 101–17; C. Blanc, “Le Baptême d’après Origène,” *Studia Patristica* 11 (1972): 113–24; H. Crouzel, “Origène et la structure du sacrement,” in *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 2 (1962): 81–92; J. Daniélou, *The Bible and The Liturgy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1956), 99–113; and J. Daniélou, *Origen* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 52–61.

first three centuries of the church's existence it was only among the Latin-speaking Christians of the North African churches, and the undoubtedly multiethnic groups that made up the Christian communities living in Rome, where we begin to encounter both the possibility of Baptism at Easter and the concomitant use of Romans 6 theology to interpret such a practice. But even here we should be cautious. Our major evidence for this is Tertullian, who writes,

The Passover [i.e., Easter] provides the day of most solemnity for baptism, for then was accomplished our Lord's passion, *and into it we are baptized*. . . . After that, Pentecost is a most auspicious period for arranging baptisms, for during it our Lord's resurrection was several times made known among the disciples, and the grace of the Holy Spirit first given. . . . For all that, every day is a Lord's day: any hour, any season, is suitable for baptism. If there is any difference of solemnity, it makes no difference to the grace.²⁰

It is thus not known if Easter Baptism was but a *theological* preference for Tertullian himself, which he wished to advocate, or a practice that he actually knew. In fact, our *only* clear reference to Easter Baptism in the first few centuries is Hippolytus of Rome's *Commentary on Daniel*, where he refers to the "Bath" being open at Pascha, but it is not clear if at Rome this was the only occasion or not. For that matter, if Hippolytus himself had anything to do with the *Apostolic Tradition*, it is interesting to note that nowhere in that document is Easter ever referred to as the occasion for Baptism. While the description of Baptism taking place at the end of an all-night Saturday vigil is certainly consistent with Easter Baptism, the document does *not* say that it *was* Easter and, for that matter, all-night vigils were more common in Christian antiquity than in the later tradition.

Similarly, apart from the possibility of a forty-day prebaptismal catechumenate in early Egypt, we simply do not know the length or

20. *DBL*, 10 (emphasis added).

duration of the final preparation period elsewhere, or when during the year it may have taken place. While *Apostolic Tradition* 17 refers to the possibility of a total of three years preparation, other sources suggest a total of three *months*, and contemporary scholarship has argued that a pattern of three *weeks* of final preparation may have been customary in several places.²¹

My point in all this is that today, in spite of the several common elements we might note regarding the baptismal process in the early church, we must be very cautious about assuming a single, universal, normative, and fixed pattern or interpretation of Baptism in early Christianity. Above all, we need to avoid the standard cliché that “the early church baptized at Easter” and knew a process consisting of, for example, a primitive period of catechesis corresponding to what would later become Lent with Baptism at Easter interpreted according to Paul’s theology of death and burial in Christ expressed in Romans 6. What we do know about early Christian baptismal practices and interpretation disagrees with that assumption. While a Romans 6 theology of Baptism is important, and certainly cherished by us Lutherans for good theological reasons, we Lutherans simply have to get used to the fact that Paul’s baptismal theology was relatively silent in the first few centuries of the church and was only rediscovered in the mid-to-late fourth century.

This silence of Saint Paul in the early centuries should speak volumes about notions of early Christian baptismal spirituality. From the early Syrian—and possibly Egyptian—traditions comes a whole cluster of baptismal images that have little to do with passing from death to life, or with sharing in the dying and rising of Christ through baptism. Such images, noted the late Mark Searle, include seeing the font as *womb*, rather than tomb, literally called the *Jordan*

21. See Maxwell E. Johnson, “From Three Weeks to Forty Days: Baptismal Preparation and the Origins of Lent,” in *LWSS*, 118–36.

itself in some traditions, images like “adoption, divinization, sanctification, gift of the Spirit, indwelling, glory, power, wisdom, rebirth, restoration, [and] mission.”²² Hence, a spirituality based on Baptism as death, burial, and resurrection is one powerful way of articulating a way of Christian identity, life, and service. A spirituality based on the new birth theology of John 3, or on images of baptismal adoption, is yet another. For the one spirituality, Christ’s own death and resurrection is of paramount importance. For the other spirituality, the incarnation itself is viewed as salvific, as, for example, in the words of Athanasius: “God became what we are so that we could be made [*theopoiethomen*] what he is”;²³ that is, through Baptism we become by adoption what Christ is by nature. For the one spirituality, Baptism is the *tomb* in which the sinful self is put to death in Christ. For the other spirituality, Baptism is the *womb* through which the Mothering Spirit of God (Spirit is feminine and actually called *Mother* in the early Syriac tradition) gives new birth and new life. For the one spirituality, Adam is to be put to death. For the other spirituality, Adam is to be sought after and rescued from sin, death, and bondage. For the one spirituality, Easter is *the* feast par excellence, the very center of the liturgical year. For the other spirituality, it is the Theophany of Christ in the Jordan at Epiphany, the very manifestation of the Trinity in the waters of the font, that assumes great importance. Indeed, how one thinks of Baptism will shape how one views Christian life and identity. Even if these two views are not contradictory or exclusive, they did and do shape distinct emphases and orientations to which we should pay attention still today.²⁴

22. M. Searle, “Infant Baptism Reconsidered,” in *LWSS*, 385.

23. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei*, 54.

24. I explore all of this more fully in my book, *Images of Baptism* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2001; reprinted by Ashland City, TN: Order of Saint Luke Publications, 2013).

The So-Called Golden Age of the Baptismal Process

We liturgists are often accused of trying to make the contemporary church fit a presumed normative liturgical pattern as it is reconstructed from the various extant sources of the fourth and fifth centuries, that period Johannes Quasten called “the Golden Age of Greek Patristic Literature.”²⁵ I doubt that the Roman Catholic Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA)²⁶ or the recent Lutheran adaptation of the catechumenal process, *Welcome to Christ*,²⁷ *Renewing Worship: Holy Baptism and Related Rites*,²⁸ and *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)*,²⁹ do much to persuade our critics that some kind of modern liturgical re-creation of this “Golden Age” is not being intended today. Even the subtitle of Edward Yarnold’s revised edition of his *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Christian Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.* would seem to provide, quite unintentionally, some fuel for such a critique. And, of course, it is true that our contemporary knowledge of the early Christian baptismal process is due, in large part, to the documentary evidence that exists from this period, namely, the extant catechetical homilies of the great “mystagogues” (e.g., Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia for the East, and Ambrose of Milan for the West).

At the same time, however, it ought not be forgotten that the various cultural and social shifts in the Constantinian era and beyond brought with them the need for the churches themselves to respond to those changing circumstances. One of those responses was the first

25. This is the subtitle of Quasten’s third volume of his monumental work, *Patrology* (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1966).

26. *The Rites of the Catholic Church*, vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 1–515.

27. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Welcome to Christ: Lutheran Rites for the Catechumenate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).

28. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Renewing Worship: Holy Baptism and Related Rites* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 25–54.

29. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship: Leader’s Desk Edition* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 592–95.

of several great periods of liturgical reform and renewal in the history of the church.³⁰ But, as recent liturgical scholarship has demonstrated, what we see in this first reform or renewal is the development of what has been called “liturgical homogeneity,” wherein through a process of assimilation to the practices of the great patriarchal and pilgrimage churches of the world—for example, Rome, Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, and Constantinople—and through the cross-fertilization of borrowing and exchange, distinctive local practices and theologies disappear in favor of others becoming copied, adapted, and synthesized.³¹ Therefore, what we often appeal to as *the* early Christian pattern for Baptism is but the end result of a process of assimilation, adaptation, and change, wherein some of the distinctive and rich theologies and spiritualities of an earlier period either disappear or are subordinated to others.

As a result of “mass conversions” in the wake of Constantine’s own “conversion,”³² the subsequent legalization and eventual adoption of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire, and the Trinitarian and christological decisions of the first ecumenical councils, this fourth- and fifth-century “homogenization” in liturgical practice is easily demonstrated. Thanks to the extant

30. The other periods of liturgical reform and renewal in the history of the church are, of course, Charlemagne’s wholesale adoption of the Roman Rite as *the* normative rite for Western Europe in the ninth century, the sixteenth-century Protestant and Catholic Reformations and their liturgical products, and, of course, the period of ecumenical liturgical convergence following the Second Vatican Council and continuing still today among us.

31. See P. Bradshaw, “The Homogenization of Christian Liturgy—Ancient and Modern: Presidential Address,” *Studia Liturgica* 26 (1996): 1–15.

32. How widespread such “mass conversion” actually was in this time period has been questioned recently by R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), who suggests that a major part of the increase in Christianity had to do, among other things, with the large number of women, fertility, and substantially higher birth rates among Christians in this period in distinction to their pagan neighbors. Similarly, according to Stark, Christianity’s appeal to women, its high view of marriage for both partners, its prohibition of abortion and infanticide, especially of female babies, and its offer of status and protection to women, and the fact that women were highly influential in the church, were also strong contributing factors to its success in the Greco-Roman world.

catechetical homilies noted above, while some local diversity continued to exist, the following came to characterize the overall ritual pattern of Baptism throughout the Christian East:

- (1) the adoption of paschal Baptism and the now forty-day season of Lent as the time of prebaptismal (daily) catechesis on Scripture, Christian life, and, especially, the Nicene Creed for the *photizomenoi* (those to be “enlightened”);
- (2) the use of “scrutinies” (examinations) and daily exorcisms throughout the period of final baptismal preparation;
- (3) the development of specific rites called *apotaxis* (renunciation) and *syntaxis* (adherence) as demonstrating a “change of ownership” for the candidates;
- (4) the development of ceremonies like the solemn *traditio* and *redditio symboli* (the presentation and “giving back” of the Nicene Creed);
- (5) the reinterpretation of the once pneumatic prebaptismal anointing as a rite of exorcism, purification, and preparation for combat against Satan;
- (6) the rediscovery and use of Romans 6 as the dominant paradigm for interpreting the baptismal immersion or submersion as entrance into the “tomb” with Christ;
- (7) the introduction of a postbaptismal anointing associated with the gift and “seal” of the Holy Spirit; and
- (8) the use of Easter week as time for “mystagogical catechesis” (an explanation of the sacramental “mysteries” the newly initiated had experienced).

Although a similar overall pattern also existed in the West, Western sources display some significant differences. Ambrose of Milan, for example, witnesses to a postbaptismal rite of footwashing (*pedilavium*)

as an integral component of baptism.³³ Some sources from Rome (e.g., the *Letter of John the Deacon to Senarius*³⁴) and North Africa (Augustine³⁵) indicate the presence of three public scrutinies (including even physical examinations) held on the third, fourth, and fifth Sundays of Lent. And, thanks to an important fifth-century letter from Pope Innocent I to Decentius of Gubbio,³⁶ it is clear that at Rome itself the pattern of episcopal hand laying with prayer and second postbaptismal anointing was understood as an essential aspect and was associated explicitly with the bishop's prerogative in "giving" the Holy Spirit.

The adoption of several of these ceremonies for the preparation and Baptism of candidates was, undoubtedly, the result of the church seeking to ensure that its sacramental life would continue to have some kind of integrity when, in a changed social and cultural context, where Christianity was now favored by the emperor, authentic conversion and properly motivated desire to enter the Christian community could no longer be assumed automatically. Defective motivations for "converting" to Christianity included the desire to marry a Christian, as well as the seeking after political or economic gain in a society having become increasingly "Christianized." And, since it was thought that the forgiveness of sins that Baptism conveyed could only be obtained once, with the exception of the one-time postbaptismal "canonical penance," there was a widespread tendency to *delay* Baptism as long as possible in order to be more sure of winning ultimate salvation. Even Constantine himself was not baptized until he was on his deathbed. Because entry into the catechumenate assured one's status as a Christian, the postponement

33. See Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 121–23.

34. *DBL*, 208–12.

35. *Ibid*, 145–47.

36. *Ibid*, 205–6.

of Baptism became a common practice in this period and there were those, who, like Constantine, remained catechumens for life. Indeed, as the experience of Augustine himself demonstrates,³⁷ it became common in some places to enroll infants in the catechumenate and then postpone their Baptism until later in life, if ever. Similarly, as the rites themselves take on either numerous ritual elements or interpretations of the rites from the context of the Greco-Roman mystery religions, which heightened dramatically the experience of those being initiated, the overall intent was surely to impress upon the catechumens and elect the seriousness of the step they were taking.³⁸

It is not, however, only the baptismal candidates who seem to have regularly experienced this process. Egeria, the late fourth-century Spanish pilgrim to Jerusalem near the end of Cyril's episcopate, records in her travel diary that, along with the candidates and their sponsors, members of the faithful also filled the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem for the daily catechetical lectures of the bishop. "At ordinary services when the bishop sits and preaches," she writes, "the faithful utter exclamations, but when they come and hear him explaining the catechesis, their exclamations are louder . . . ; and . . . they ask questions on each point." Further, during the Easter week of mystagogy she notes that the applause of the newly baptized and faithful "is so loud that it can be heard outside the church." Because of this, she states that "all the people in these parts are able to follow the Scriptures when they are read in church."³⁹

Designed, of course, with adult converts in mind, the overall ritual process of Baptism in these several sources was to be shortlived, due, according to John Baldovin, to its success.⁴⁰ In other words,

37. *Confessions* 1.11.

38. Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, 59–66.

39. J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (London: SPCK, 1971), 144–46.

it eventually died out, in part at least because, apparently, it had worked and, for good or ill, the empire had become “Christian!” The North African controversy between “Pelagianism” and Augustine over the long-standing practice of infant initiation, and Augustine’s theological rationale for infant initiation based on a theology of “original sin,” however, will lead to its further decline, even if in the case of Rome it would still be contained in the various liturgical books. At the same time, Augustine’s lengthy battle with “Donatism,” over the Donatist practice of “rebaptizing” Catholics and their insistence on the moral character of the baptizer in assuring the validity of Baptism in the aftermath of the Diocletian persecution, will lead also to an “orthodox” sacramental theology based on the use of proper elements and words with Christ himself underscored as the true sacramental minister. If Augustine himself knew an initiation rite similar to those summarized above,⁴¹ his own theological emphases, born in the heat of controversy, would set the agenda for what I refer to as a later Western-medieval “sacramental minimalism” focused on “matter” and “form,” the *quamprimum* (“as soon as possible”) Baptism of infants, and an objective sacramental validity ensured by an *ex opere operato* understanding.

In spite of the apparent success of this baptismal process in early Christianity, however, we should be careful not to romanticize it today. We have little to corroborate Egeria’s perhaps exaggerated description of the apparently large numbers of catechumens and faithful in late fourth-century Jerusalem who gathered to hear Cyril’s lectures and who greeted them with thunderous applause. Jerusalem, after all, was a major pilgrimage center, whose liturgical practices

40. John Baldovin, “Christian Worship to the Eve of the Reformation,” in *The Making of Jewish and Christian Worship*, ed. P. Bradshaw and L. Hoffman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 167.

41. See William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1995), 79ff.

may or may not have been typical of churches elsewhere or everywhere. In other words, while we know that such a baptismal process clearly existed in the church of this period, we do not know how many people actually went through such an extended catechumenate in preparation for Baptism or what the overall ritual shape of Baptism was really like in the various and numerous *parish* churches themselves.⁴² For that matter, even Easter Baptism, notes Paul Bradshaw, appears to have been a custom that lasted for only about fifty years in some places, and there is enough evidence to suggest that, even if it remained on the books as the theoretical norm, other occasions besides Easter, such as Epiphany, the feasts of particular local martyrs, and even Christmas remained and continued in some places, even in the West, as baptismal occasions.⁴³ Our evidence for this “Golden Age” of Baptism, then, is pretty much limited to the practice of the large patriarchal and pilgrimage centers and to surviving texts from their illustrious bishops. Hence, we should not automatically assume that everyone everywhere was doing this anymore than we should assume that actual parish liturgical practice today can be read from liturgical manuals, the texts of our current worship books, or, from exceptional parishes and university churches.

Nevertheless, as an excellent and proven manner by which the early churches, in a changed social and cultural environment, attempted to form adult converts, in the power of the Holy Spirit, by a highly ritual-sacramentalized all-encompassing process “in the Word, prayer, worship, Christian community, and service in the world,”⁴⁴ this process still has much to commend itself for our usefulness today. It is to this, my final point, “The Implications of

42. Cf. Juliette Day, *Baptism in Early Byzantine Palestine 325–451*, Alcuin/GROW Liturgical Study 43 (Cambridge: Grove Books, Ltd., 1999).

43. See P. Bradshaw, “*Diem baptismo sollemniorem*”: Initiation and Easter in Christian Antiquity,” in *LWSS*, 137–47.