

How Baptism Doesn't Form Us: Why We Seek Other Ways to Grow the Church

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During that season of my ministry when I served as a seminary professor, I periodically showed up in Seattle with a cadre of students and we'd spend a week learning about baptismal living, the ancient catechumenate, and a contemporary manifestation of catechumenal ministry at Phinney Ridge Lutheran Church. We always went home inspired.

When I became a bishop, I invited Pastor Paul Hoffman of Phinney Ridge to come to Michigan to lead a seminar very much like his Faith and Font event. Everyone who attended was genuinely inspired. At some level, I expected wonderful things to blossom. Perhaps a baptismal way of being church.

And why not? Among Martin Luther's greatest contributions is what we might call a baptismal spirituality, or even a baptismal way of living. From a Lutheran perspective, "washing with water in the name of the triune God before the Christian assembly is at the center of one's whole life as a Christian, no matter when in life baptism occurs."² Luther says baptism is to be cherished by Christians as their "greatest treasure on earth."³

What blossomed? "The grass withers, the flower fades," the prophet Isaiah declares.⁴ So, it seems, does inspiration for baptismal living and catechumenal ministry, certainly in North West Lower Michigan but I suspect throughout the Lutheran Church. Fonts remain small and covered and often out-of-the-way. We are slow to touch the baptismal water and to make the sign of the cross. A congregation engaged in robust catechumenal ministry is the exception rather than the rule. How I wish the Great Easter Vigil was the heart of every congregation's life. Even more, I pray that the stories of sacred Scripture encapsulated in Luther's "flood prayer" would become the narratives that guide our Church's life, rather than the tall tales that govern so much of the Church's decision-making.

Paraphrasing Luther, "We give you thanks, O God, for in the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters and by your Word you created the world, calling forth life in which you took delight. Through the waters of the flood you delivered Noah and his family, and through the sea you led your people Israel from slavery into freedom. At the river your Son was baptized by John and

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² See Dennis L. Bushkofsky and Craig A. Satterlee, *The Christian Life: Holy Baptism and Life Passages* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2008), p. 4.

³ WA 37:258–304.

⁴Isaiah 40:7-8.

anointed with the Holy Spirit. By the baptism of Jesus' death and resurrection you set us free from the power of sin and death and raise us up to live in you."⁵

"The grass withers, the flower fades," the prophet Isaiah declares. Instead of these stories of creation, deliverance, freedom, empowerment, and life with and in God, so often the Church operates out of stories of scarcity, of saving for a rainy day; stories of needing to work harder to do better, of being the best and winning the congregational or denominational or whatever-it-is competition; cultural stories of the separation of Church and state, of people getting what they deserve, of everything happening for a reason, of bigger is better; stories of nostalgia for the past, of fear of the future, of resistance to change. Or we operate out of stories about making a difference, about it all being up to us to make the world better, rather than trusting the Spirit and leaning into our sacred signs and stories.

But mostly, rather than living out of the biblical narrative of being "baptized into Christ's death, buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life."⁶ Rather than living out of this biblical, baptismal narrative, we operate out of stories that bolster our resolve as a Church never, ever to die.

Ask many people what the purpose of the Church is, and they will tell you it's to exist, to endure, to never, ever die. Consider Jesus' words to the disciples: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."⁷ We've decided that dying and rising, drowning and being born—the baptismal life of openness to self-sacrifice, sharing patiently in affliction, resisting the lure of power, foregoing influence and status, and refusing to compete according to the rules of the world, all of which Jesus modeled on the cross, are not visions for mission that attract new members and grow Churches. And so, we tone down talk of baptismal living that involves denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus, because we fear this kind of talk undermines the institutional Church.

Again, Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."⁸ We can proclaim these words confidently over the casket of our most beloved kin. But we do not apply these words to the Church because they don't make a very attractive mission statement. And so never ever do we preach that Christ may be calling a congregation, institution, or denomination to lose its life for the sake of the gospel. Instead, we say that we know God has a mission for us, if we can just figure it out—like it's a blessed Scooby Doo mystery.

Why do you suppose this is? I'm ready to concede that, in North West Lower Michigan, the reason very well may be the mediocre leadership of the bishop. But what if it's something more

⁵ELW, p. 230.

⁶ Romans 6:3-4.

⁷ Matt. 16:24.

⁸ John 12:24, 25.

than my incompetence? What if we don't want to entrust the Church to Jesus because Jesus might have some dying and rising in mind? Could it be that we desire to be formed in ways other than the ways the triune God active in baptism forms us? Is it possible that the Church born from the font is not the Church we want? And so, we seek other ways of forming and growing the Church so that we won't ever die.

Christ's Dying Church

I hear our fear of a dying Church most Sundays as I visit congregations. "What is the Church's future?" This is the question I am most often asked. "What is *my* Church's future?" That's the question behind the question. "Is my Church going to die? Can you save my Church? Will you?" "Give us a program. Give us a plan. How do we get young families? What we really want is a quick fix solution that will guarantee growth." "How much is the Church—the ELCA, the synod, and the bishop—willing to change so that we don't have to?"

Here's the real question: How do we speak honestly about the state of the Church in a manner that proclaims the promise of the gospel without giving cause for false security or illusory hope? The answer is baptismal. It's dying and rising with Christ. Whatever else we might say about the institutional Church generally and our own context in particular, we can say this. "The Church is changing." "The Church is changing." Today, many leaders of and commentators on the mainline institutional Church frequently frame the changes the Church faces negatively and express them urgently. "The Church as we know it is dying." But we don't say the Church will rise. We don't say Christ is raising his Church to new life. Instead, we say, "We have to stop the dying! We have to turn things around!" And then we set out to do it.

As I consider Christ's dying Church and the Church's proclamation of Christ as crucified and risen Savior, I am increasingly concerned, even alarmed, that, rather than proclaiming that Christ brings life out of death, even the death of the Church, publicly recognized religious leaders are expected to somehow guarantee the survival of the (currently configured) ecclesial institution. Faced with declining memberships, shrinking budgets, and even the very survival of their congregations, this situation is all too real for many religious leaders. And Church leaders are under increasing pressure to preserve not only their congregations, but also Church institutions, and denominations.

Writing more than 40 years ago, homileticians Morris J. Niedenthal, and Charles Rice assert that, in addition to—or perhaps instead of—helping people live out their baptism by growing in faith and knowledge of God and fullness of life in Christ, we "preach the party line, imploring people to attend Church regularly, to participate faithfully in the activities of the congregation, and to give generously to the work of the kingdom in the Church." To support the institution, we preach "to maintain and strengthen loyalties; to keep the Christian frame of reference

intact, offering the perspective of life on God's terms; and to provide a therapeutic effect, giving people 'something to go on for the week.'"⁹

Baptism doesn't have much to say about how to keep a Church from dying. Instead, baptism provides a frame other than survival for understanding our changing Church. That frame is death and resurrection or receiving the Holy Spirit or being joined to the communion of saints. I have become very comfortable framing the changing Church as the activity of the Holy Spirit for which no one is to blame. I like to muse that Christ might be getting in shape, getting his body, the Church down to fighting weight. And so, we shouldn't be surprised that the Church is shedding some pounds. I am clear that God through Christ promises to be with the Church forever. It's equally true that all expressions of the Church, like all living things, have life spans. We proclaim that God brings life out of death, and not that we are afraid to die. As a Lutheran bishop, the Church's death and resurrection is about ensuring the Lutheran proclamation of the gospel in every corner of my territory and not preserving 115–no 113 –congregations for their own sake.

As my wife repeatedly reminds me, here tone is everything. I lost three congregations since becoming bishop. Notice that I couldn't say three congregations died on my watch. Even when it is the right thing, it hurts on so many levels. It is death. And it is personal. I need to share my people's pain, to love them, to grieve with them, and to genuinely care about their expression of Christ 's Church even when I cannot or will not save it.

For me this is all baptismal—the Church joined to Christ's death and resurrection, the Church part of the communion of saints, the Church participating in the work of the Holy Spirit. This is what baptism births and forms Christ's dying and rising Church to be. But if the Church's goal is never to die, baptism will get in the way. Baptism will form the Church in ways we don't want to be formed. Allow me to share six ways: (1) giving up on growing; (2) promoting patience; (3) serving the Holy Spirit; (4) worshiping wondrously; (5) behaving differently; and (6) speaking of Jesus.

Give Up on Growing

A church determined to never die is obsessed with numerical growth. We need a never-ending supply of members to do the work, pay the bills, and keep the church stable by keeping things the same. Churches afraid of dying will tell you that we created a real problem for ourselves when we stopped condemning people to hell and started espousing ecumenical and inter-faith relationships. Hardest of all, we proclaim Christ's radical grace. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." Jesus declares.¹⁰ You don't have to serve on a Church committee to be saved. And so, we are urgent for new members, especially young families, because they will provide years of service and income.

⁹ Edmund A. Steimle, Morris J. Niedenthal, and Charles Rice, *Preaching the Story*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), p. 6.

¹⁰ John 12:32.

The problem with baptismal formation is that in baptism God doesn't make us worker bees, cogs serving an ecclesiastical machine. Baptismal vocation is so much bigger than volunteering in a congregation. God "claims us as daughters and sons, making us heirs of God's promise and servants of all." We are "sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." We are God's beloved children.

But we, Christ's Church, treat people like a commodity, a resource to maintain the institutional church. How often I hear sermons that suggest that Jesus saved us, so we can volunteer in the congregation. Visitors show up and, if they are someone we can use, we smell fresh meat. And if not, we ignore them altogether at coffee hour or tell them they're sitting in our pew in worship. And we baptize our urgent need for members by appealing to the Great Commission.

Church historian Alan Kreider observes. "Early Christian preachers do not appeal to the "Great Commission" in Matthew 28:19 to inspire their members to "make disciples of all nations"; they assume that the apostles (Jesus's eleven plus Paul) had done this in the Church's earliest years and that it had already been fulfilled in the Church's global expansion. When writers referred to the Matthew 28:19 doctrine text, it was to buttress the doctrine of the Trinity or to address the issue of baptism, not to inspire missionary activity."¹¹

Rather than fretting over the church's future, the early Christians had a perspective that they called "patience." They believed that God was in charge of events; they knew they were not. So, they were not surprised that the Church's growth was uneven, that there were certain areas where there were concentrations of Christians and other areas where there were no believers at all. Christian leaders didn't think or write about how to systemize the spread of Christianity; they were not concerned to cover the world with evangelistic efforts.¹² Instead, they trusted that God is in charge of the future, that Christ is leading his Church, that the Holy Spirit is at work in the world. And they patiently waited for the reign of God to come in all its fullness. I wonder what would happen if, when we feel the urgency of a dying church, our first response was to pray, make the sign of the cross, and declare aloud that we have been baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. And the future is secure.

Promote Patience

Instead of wringing their hands and obsessing over growth, early Christians cultivated and promoted patience. They concentrated on developing practices that contributed to a *habitus*—a system of embodied dispositions that organize the ways individuals perceive the world around them and react to it—for both individual Christians and Christian communities. They believed that when the *habitus* was healthy, the churches would grow. Their theology was unhurried — a theology of patience. It is characteristic of their approach that the carriers and embodi-ers of the

¹¹ Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), p. 9.

¹² Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, p. 74.

growth were marginal, humble, and often anonymous, women as well as men, individuals as well as communities.¹³

Serve the Holy Spirit

Promoting patience puts God rather than us in charge of the Church. We claim that, in baptism, we are sealed by the Holy Spirit. We teach that the Holy Spirit calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the Church. But how often we treat the Holy Spirit as a power or energy that we control and wield for our own ends and devices. I hear it in prayers when, rather than opening ourselves to the Holy Spirit who blows where it wills, we ask the Holy Spirit to help us do whatever it is we will.

Alan Kreider observes that early Christians believed the Holy Spirit worked by what he calls *ferment*. Ferment is not susceptible to human control and its pace could not be sped up. But in the ferment there was a bubbling energy – a bottom-up inner life-that had immense potential.

Fermentation is an intriguing process. It is gradual. Except for a stray bubble that emerges now and then, nothing seems to be happening. Until late in its operation, it is unimpressive. And yet it has a cumulative power that creates and transforms..... So it was with early Christianity. On the plane of the emperors, senates, and legions, Christianity was a minor *superstitio*. To the people who mattered, it was of little significance, and yet, for those with eyes to see and intuitions to perceive, a new energy was emerging, something reticently alive and inexorable in operation.¹⁴

It seems that this is how the Holy Spirit given in baptism works in the life of the Christian and in the life of the Church. I say, “The grass withers, the flower fades.” And the Holy Spirit answers, “No. Craig, your perspective is too narrow and your attention span too short. Look beyond a single congregation or even the 113 congregations of your synod. Look at the whole Church around the world. And look for longer than the five-year you’ve served as bishop or the 30 years you’ve served the Church. It took 40 years to lead my people from slavery to a place of promise. And it took three endings to John’s Gospel before the disciples understood.”

I’ve seen the Holy Spirit ferment for a long semester and then a preaching student who’s been telling us for weeks what we should and ought and must do grasps the power of preaching grace. I’ve experienced the fermentation of the Holy Spirit in congregations that unexpectedly encounter Jesus in people they thought they were to feed and clothe but not talk to. But, when attendance is dropping, money is running out, and our church is dying, we don’t want to wait on the fermentation of the Holy Spirit. We want a program guaranteed to turn things around now.

Rather than panic, that’s when we need to stop. When we take serving rather than controlling the Holy Spirit seriously, leading the Church becomes about intentionally submitting to the Holy

¹³ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, p. 74.

¹⁴ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, p. 73.

Spirit. In our own life, Cathy and I no longer ask God for much of anything. We ask God to make God's will known to us and to be clear about it. Over the years, we discovered that God's will is better than what we want and wiser than what we think best. And that, in the end, we're going to do God's will anyway. And so, we pray, "Be clear." In my work as a bishop, I discovered it essential to spend hours each week in silent prayer working hard to drown out all the voices and actively listen to the Holy Spirit. I wonder what would happen if, when the church was uncertain because it sensed death at hand, we prayed, "Your will be done—and be clear." And then we made time as a community to silently listen to the Holy Spirit.

Worship Wondrously

Of course, the most reliable way to experience the Holy Spirit is to gather with God's people around word, water, bread, and wine. The problem, of course, is that for many of us, worship is the hardest place to give up control and submit to the Holy Spirit. For a church afraid to die, worship becomes a consumable, a product designed to attract people, to meet their needs, and to keep them coming. Often, worship planners and leaders either want to accomplish some goal or advance some agenda by planting something innovative. Or, we are obsessed with following every rubric to the letter, so worship is not ruined. Or we are afraid to do anything different, because it might be wrong and someone might get upset and leave.

To submit to the Holy Spirit, we strive to worship wondrously. We strive to worship wondrously—to worship in the awareness that God, rather than we, is the principal actor in worship. For the early church, worship was the energizing core of the Christians' life, the source of their buoyancy that contrasted so strongly with the protective defensiveness of the Lanuvium *collegium*, for example. Amid conventional North African society, Christians were able to embody an alternative *habitus* because they were convinced that they experienced God's energizing reality.

In Milan, Ambrose—because I never give a lecture without citing St. Ambrose. Ambrose was convinced that God acts in baptism and Eucharist to give faith and to lead Christians to see their lives and the world with the eyes of faith; that is, to see beyond the temporal to the eternal, beyond the realities of this world to the reality of God's reign.¹⁵

At Notre Dame I learned that worship is "primary theology"—an experience of God—rather than "secondary theology," the Church's reflection on its experience of God.¹⁶ I learned, *Lex orandi, lex credendi* or "worship trumps theology." While they may not be able to articulate it, the people in the pew understand this. They understand that worship is God's initiative and activity in human history and the world, as well as in our individual lives, before it is an activity

¹⁵ Ambrose of Milan, *De sacramentis*, 3.2.15.

¹⁶ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1992), pp. 74ff.

of Christians or the Church.¹⁷ I tell myself that's why they ask questions or sometimes get upset as they experience changes in worship.

To worship wondrously is to expect God to act and to accept that our best way to honor God might be to lay aside our agendas, expectations, and liturgical convictions and open ourselves to the Holy Spirit at work in the assembly. In my experience, this can be hard. When I manage to do it, I am seldom disappointed. On many Sundays, I'm reminded of some words from Annie Dillard that I first learned at Notre Dame:

"The higher Christian Churches - where, if anywhere, I belong - come at God with an unwarranted air of professionalism, with authority and pomp, as though they knew what they were doing, as though people in themselves were an appropriate set of creatures to have dealings with God. I often think of the set pieces of liturgy as certain words which people have successfully addressed to God without their getting killed. In the high churches they saunter through the liturgy like Mohawks along a strand of scaffolding who have long since forgotten their danger. If God were to blast such a service to bits, the congregation would be, I believe, genuinely shocked. But in the low churches you expect it any minute. This is the beginning of wisdom."¹⁸

Behave Differently

In the early church, what outsiders saw –and what outsiders see today–is not so much our worship but our behavior, our way of being in the world. According to Tertullian, the outsiders looked at the Christians and saw them energetically feeding poor people and burying them, caring for boys and girls who lacked property and parents, and being attentive to aged slaves and prisoners. Kreider observes, "They interpreted these actions as a "work of love." And they said, "*Vide*, look! How they love one another." They did not say, "*Aude*, listen to the Christians message;" they did not say, "*Lege*, read what they write." Hearing and reading were important, and some early Christians worked to communicate in those ways too. But we must not miss the reality: the pagans said *Look!* Christianity's truth was visible; it was embodied and enacted by its members."¹⁹

Have you noticed that many Lutherans are really allergic to embodied practices, of behaving in an overtly Christian manner, lest someone confuse our behavior for works righteousness? For Lutherans, it's all about right understanding—we are justified by grace through faith apart from works of law. Except that's not how people live out their baptism.

Dying and rising with Christ is more than an intellectual exercise. Alan Kreider observes, "In Christianity's early centuries, conversion involved changes in belief, belonging, and behavior—in the context of an experience of God." The Church reached out to people who needed to

¹⁷ Craig A. Satterlee, *When God Speaks through Worship: Stories Congregations Live By* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2009), pp. 4-5.

¹⁸ Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (New York: Harper& Row, 1977), p. 59.

¹⁹ Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, p. 61.

belong—widows, orphans, and the poor. It expected people to behave a certain way, to act their way into who we are in Christ. The church was convinced that believing comes from doing and that truth only becomes real to us when it touches the skin. Being converted to a community's convictions involved "becoming the kind of person who belonged to that kind of community." And this meant that conversion in the ancient church was at least as much about changing one's loyalties and one's lifestyle as it was about changing one's creed.²⁰ Baptism is more than intellectual assent to doctrine; baptism is embarking on a chosen way of life that includes behaving differently.

Churches afraid to die have several problems with behaving differently that all seem to stem from the fear that someone might become upset and either leave or not join. Expectations might be too high. And so, we *encourage* rather than *expect* Christians to behave differently. Often, the behavior we encourage is not different enough for anyone to notice. And we certainly don't expect people to explicitly connect their behavior to Jesus. We even overlook and excuse bad behavior because tolerating bad behavior seems preferable to the offender feeling insulted because we point out their bad behavior and leaving. When it comes to incorporating new people, we make it easy for anyone to join us, forgetting that grace is formative. Grace works and is at work as we act our way into believing. We also forget that, the easier we make it to step in, the easier we make it to step out.

And we practice radical hospitality. "Make yourself at home. We don't stand on ceremony here." I do a lot of traveling and I can tell you the last thing you want is a blind guy who is unfamiliar with your house making himself at home. Baptism flies in the face of so-called radical hospitality. The invitation to baptism says we will treat you like a guest for a while, a welcome guest whom we surround with members of the family and help you make your way. But, nevertheless, a guest.

Baptism expects a relationship with Jesus before we take him into our bodies. In the waters of baptism, Christ establishes that relationship and promises never to abandon us. What is that the Psalmist says?

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long."²¹

How baptismal! In the waters of baptism, Christ shows us just how radical God's hospitality is, even compared to our finite attempts at inclusivity.

²⁰ Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999), p. xv.

²¹ Psalm 23:4-6.

But when we are radically hospitable, we take this great gift and turn it into an obstacle. We say this is not the Church's table. It's Jesus' table. Add in the process, we decapitate the Church as the body of Christ from Jesus our head. We tell the communion of saints their practices were wrong or at least no longer matter. All in an effort to get people to feel comfortable and join.

Better to name what behavior is required to be part of the community, just as we would do wanted comes to belonging to a family. The Christian family expects worship, Bible study, prayer, generosity, service, advocacy, justice. We promise such things as baptism. Outline the expectation that people will grow in grace. Don't assume people know or will learn by osmosis. Make disciples. People aren't looking for a Church. They are looking for an encounter with Jesus that changes their lives. Sounds baptismal to me.

Speak about Jesus

After all, baptism leads us to speak about Jesus rather than church. Churches afraid of dying want to speak about their church. Ask those folk about Jesus and they tell you about their church, about how much they love their church, about how much their church is a family. They will tell you about their pastor, about how great or cool their pastor is. Except the question was about Jesus. I used to think that if we can get people to come to church, they might come to know Jesus. Now I'm convinced that if we can help people come to know Jesus, they just might come to church.

And not more than leading us to talk about Jesus rather than church. Baptism leads us to get out of church, or at least the church building. Baptism leads us to get out into the community, not to take Jesus there but because that's where Jesus is. Churches afraid of dying don't want to leave the building. They need to believe that Jesus is in here not out there. And they don't want to engage the community or get to know the neighborhood because the neighborhood might change them.

Christ's Rising Church

As long as the church is afraid of dying, fonts will remain small and covered and often out-of-the-way. We will be slow to touch the baptismal water and to make the sign of the cross. A congregation engaged in robust catechumenal ministry will be the exception rather than the rule. For, if we allow baptism to form the Church, the church as we know it might die. And the Church born at the font may not be the Church we want. The Church born at the font may not be our church. It may not be my church. My church might die. And I just can't let that happen.

Except that it's not my church. It's not our church. It's Christ's Church. And Christ is about dying and rising. "The grass withers, the flower fades," the prophet Isaiah declares. And, "The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom."²² Jesus is about dying and rising. So, the Church born at the font Will be Christ's rising Church. The Church born

²² Isaiah 35:1.

at the font will be Christ's eternal Church. This is the promise of baptism. And if baptism is the form the Church, we have some dying to do. The hymn is so true.

The Church of Christ in every age
Beset by change but Spirit led,
Must claim and test its heritage
And keep on rising from the dead.²³

²³ELW, p. 729.