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Signed, Sealed, Delivered: Baptism as Beginning in Christ, and Becoming Like Christ

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

SIGNED, SEALED, DELIVERED:
BAPTISM AS BEGINNING IN CHRIST,
AND BECOMING LIKE CHRIST

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GEORGE FOX EVANGELICAL SEMINARY IN CANDIDACY
FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY REV. ERIC E. PETERSON

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on February 10, 2016
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics and Future Studies.

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Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Table of Contents	iii
Epigraph	iv
I. Introduction: On The Teleology of Persons	1
II. Cultural Baptism: The Church's Chief Contender	19
III. Baptism and the Bible: The Watery Thread	38
IV. Sacramental Semiotics: Sacred Signs	69
V. Living Wet: Full Immersion in Abundant Life	90
VI. Conclusion: The Signs and Seals of Deliverance	116
Epilogue	133
Acknowledgements	135
Bibliography	138

*Then just six months later I baptized her.
And I felt like asking her, "What have I done? What does it mean?"
That was a question that came to me often,
not because I felt less than certain I had done something that did mean something,
but because no matter how much I thought and read and prayed,
I felt outside the mystery of it.*

~Marilynne Robinson, Gilead

I. Introduction: On The Teleology of Persons

*What is the chief end of man?
Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.*

~First question and answer of *The Shorter Catechism*

*Who am I?
They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.
Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine.*

~Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Michael's life had been a success by all standards of measurement: a long and illustrious career as a tenured professor of biology at a prestigious university; a good marriage and family life which included three healthy, well-adjusted children; respect in civic circles; a comfortable home to live in; and money in the bank to live out his retirement years. An avid fly fisherman, he spent delightful hours on the rivers in the summer and quiet evenings tying his own flies in the winter. By outward appearances he was living a pleasant version of the American Dream.

Haunting his storied past, however, was a little-known secret harbored in and harassing his heart. Although thankfully I didn't know it at the time he came to see me, this was Michael's last shot at faith; he was giving God one final chance. The pastoral conversation that followed would determine whether or not he would continue to contend with God.

As his story unfolded, it became clear that he had done everything 'right': attending good schools, publishing in the right journals, serving in civic circles, going to church, even tithing. However, after a lifetime of trying, he discovered that doing these things was not inherently satisfying, and even more disconcerting, it did not make him 'right' with God. The post-vocational rhythms of his twilight years had created the space for him to finally confront his existential ghosts, leading him to realize that something was still terribly wrong. Unable to distract himself any longer from the unsettled condition of his soul, the man before me alternately wept and raged, describing how it always felt to him as if his prayers "kept bouncing off the ceiling." The traumatic event from his adolescence that had twisted his identity, re-forming him from the *imago Dei* to some dastardly distortion thereof, was robbing him of an abundant way of life. He was, in

other words, trapped in the living of a lie, yet still looking for deliverance, hoping to be rescued into a life of truth, goodness, and beauty.

If *New York Times* columnist David Brooks were speaking to him, Michael would undoubtedly feel understood, albeit in a discomfiting kind of way:

...you spend a lot of time cultivating professional skills, but you don't have a clear idea of the sources of meaning in life, so you don't know where you should devote your skills, which career path will be highest and best. Years pass and the deepest parts of yourself go unexplored and unstructured. You are busy, but you have a vague anxiety that your life has not achieved its ultimate meaning and significance. You live with an unconscious boredom, not really loving, not really attached to the moral purposes that give life its worth. You lack the internal criteria to make unshakeable commitments. You never develop inner constancy, the integrity that can withstand popular disapproval or a serious blow. You find yourself doing things that other people approve of, whether these things are right for you or not. You foolishly judge other people by their abilities, not by their worth. You do not have a strategy to build character, and without that, not only your inner life but also your external life will eventually fall to pieces.¹

In my role as a pastor over the last twenty-five years, I have been listening to people share their own personal version of this rather universal experience. In the strong conviction that the God in this world is primarily about the work of redeeming the broken areas of creation, I have sought to find good-news words and metaphors to speak into bad-news situations. That search has led me back to the enduring power of the sacraments for both their enactive and participative ability to help people live as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

A Tale of Two Forces

The primary ministry challenge I wrestle with involves peoples' experience of competing and contradictory values between the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom

¹ David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), xiii.

of God. When it comes to instilling worth in people, the culture we live in promulgates values primarily related to consumption and production (the choice of order is intentional, as the one precedes the other as a formative influence). These materialistic values are difficult to reconcile with the biblical witness. In this dissertation and in my ministry, I am interested in answering the question, *what will help people to not only see themselves as holy, but to live hallowed, meaningful, and abundant lives in a broken and fearful world?* The driving thesis of this dissertation is that baptism is the biblical sign that both identifies people as the reconciled children of God, and provides the sacramental structures out of which to live sacred lives in a sacrilegious world. Embracing this identity is the key to living a good, abundant and meaningful life.

A much larger contextual issue drives this exploration, namely, the crisis of identity that is prevalent in our culture. Various versions of Michael's struggle regularly get played out in people's lives, resulting in assorted degrees of satisfaction and discouragement, leading them in a host of directions to remedy the discontent. This is the heart of pastoral ministry: engaging others in their struggle with their own version of the big existential questions:

- What is the meaning of life?
- Do people matter?
- What in the world am I doing here?

That universal human longing for a meaningful life, or what has been described as "*homo significans*"² is what prompts the continual search for significance. This pursuit, of course, can assume various forms and take us in many directions.

² Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 13.

From a philosophical perspective we might think of this in terms of human teleology – the ultimate end or purpose for which a person exists – a chief end. A handful of historical examples will suffice to demonstrate the ubiquitous nature of questions related to the meaning of life that people have sought to answer since time immemorial.

Beginning with the Ancient Near Eastern Akkadian epic of Enuma Elish (second millennium BCE), we can detect very early attempts at providing such a *raison d'être*. According to this primeval creation story, the purpose of humanity was to serve the gods. Consider this brief section from a stone carving identified by biblical archeologists simply as Tablet VI:

Out of his blood they fashioned mankind.
He *imposed service* and let free the gods.
After Ea, the wise, had created mankind,
Had imposed upon it the *service of the gods* –
That work was beyond comprehension...³

That sense of transcendence, the awareness of ‘otherness’ has been an enduring quality of humans – a deep, innate recognition that the solitary life, divorced from community, is ultimately unsatisfying. Serving the gods, then, amounts to work that is so meaningful as to be utterly (and *delightfully*, one might infer) incomprehensible.

Aristotle (fourth century BCE) similarly explored causation, writing, “We do not have knowledge of a thing until we have grasped its why, that is to say, its cause.”⁴

Aristotle’s first three causes identify a thing’s purpose as *material*, *formal*, and *efficient*.

But it is the fourth and last category that is most helpful for people to consider, namely

³ James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures, Volume I*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958), 37; italics mine.

⁴ “Aristotle on Causality,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-causality>.

his *final cause*, which he describes as “the end toward which it directs. That for the sake of which a thing is what it is. For a seed – a plant. For a sailboat, it might be sailing.”⁵

What about people? What might be the ultimate purpose for humans? When somebody comes to the end of his or her life, by what measure will it be determined whether or not it was a good, meaningful, and purpose-filled life? Perhaps even more crucially, what criteria for life concludes with the blessed words, “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (Mt 25:21 NRSV⁶). These are the types of questions which, both unwittingly and consciously, affect life choices in human beings. Grappling with them may be among the most critical of endeavors since the way one answers them significantly influences the quality of one’s life for good and for ill.

From an Aristotelian perspective, when one observes a ship or a glass the functions of these objects are readily apparent. To state the obvious, in the case of a ship its utilitarian purpose is for transportation on the water, and in the case of a glass it is to function as a container from which to drink. However, when we observe people, their purposes are not so obvious and clear, given the range of possibilities.

- *Does human telos extend beyond mere utilitarianism?*
- *Who defines and determines meaning?*
- *What beliefs and behaviors comprise the so-called ‘good life’?*

Engaging these questions so as to better understand the intrinsic purpose of people is the primary interest of this dissertation.

⁵ “Aristotle on Causality,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-causality>.

⁶ Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

Searching for Meaning

The Stoic philosopher Epictetus (AD 55-135) claimed that the life of the mind held the key to answering such questions: “To live in the presence of great truths and eternal laws, to be led by *permanent ideals*; that is what keeps a man patient when the world ignores him and calm and unspoiled when the world praises him.”⁷ Versions of this perspective appear in people who are *principled* in their lifestyles, making decisions based on values, convictions and commitments, unclouded by feelings, and with little or no regard for the consequences of their actions. It is an ethic of “doing the right thing because it is the right thing to do.”

In contradistinction to both Aristotle and Epictetus, a more fatalistic approach is found in the philosophy of nihilism, a doctrine originating in the Greek philosopher Gorgias (ca. 483-375 BCE) which argues that life is inherently without objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value, thereby discounting the importance of morality altogether.⁸ The contemporary expression of this perspective is captured in the nihilistic phrase, “Life is hard, and then you die.” Still, most people discard such a defeatist stance, and choose to remain engaged in a quest for meaning.

Existentialist philosophy largely addresses just this chronic human search for significance, but suggests that in an absurd, illogical world we must create our own existence through rational decisions and lifestyle choices. The frame of existentialism

⁷ As quoted by David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), 30; italics mine.

⁸ See C. Francis Higgins, “Gorgias (483-375 B.C.E),” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource*, accessed February 15, 2016, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/gorgias>.

may best be summarized by Albert Camus (1913-1960) who alludes to the Greek myth of Sisyphus – who is condemned for eternity to roll a rock up a hill, only to have it roll to the bottom again each time. This demonstrates the pointlessness of existence, while showing that Sisyphus ultimately finds meaning and purpose in his life by continually applying himself to the task.⁹ Undoubtedly there is virtue to remaining engaged in noble struggles. But is a Sisyphean life the best, most fully satisfying answer?

The search continues into the present inasmuch as the protracted quest for meaning persists. Joseph Badaracco, a professor of ethics at Harvard Business School, suggests that these are perennial questions reflecting our life-long search for significance. He summarizes it eloquently:

Human beings seem to have a built-in “explanatory drive” – we want to make sense of what is happening all around us. In traditional societies, religion and rulers, along with tradition, gave people a sense of order and meaning. In modern societies, people supposedly get more information in a day than medieval peasants did in a lifetime, but we deal with this bombardment in the age-old way – by searching for patterns, trends, and meaning.¹⁰

Even with the development of increasingly sophisticated algorithms for patterns and trends, meaning remains largely elusive, and the search continues. In his own attempt to identify the crux of this perennial search Badaracco suggests that people find meaning in “...a cause or a challenge that demands and merits their best efforts, really tests their competence and their characters, and helps them lead lives they deeply value.”¹¹

Thirty years ago, social critic Wendell Berry (1934-) asked the penetrating question, “What Are People For?” in a brief essay by the same title. He criticizes the

⁹ Luke Mastin, “Existentialism,” *The Basics of Philosophy*, 2008, accessed June 18, 2015, http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_existentialism.html.

¹⁰ Joseph L. Badaracco, *The Good Struggle: Responsible Leadership in an Unforgiving World* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 2013), 44.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

erosion of a strong work ethic due to the effects of both the Industrial Revolution and social welfare programs, and attempts to answer his own question with a series of other questions about human telos.

Is their greatest dignity in unemployment? Is the obsolescence of human beings now our social goal? One would conclude so from our attitude toward work, especially the manual work necessary to the long-term preservation of the land, and from our rush toward mechanization, automation, and computerization. In a country that puts an absolute premium on labor-saving measures, short workdays, and retirement, why should there be any surprise at permanence of unemployment and welfare dependency? Those are only different names for our national ambitions.

In the country, meanwhile, there is work to be done. This is the inescapably necessary work of restoring and caring for our farms, forests, and rural towns and communities – work that we have not been able to pay people to do for forty years and that, thanks to our forty-year “solution to the farm problem,” few people any longer know how to do.¹²

Berry, it appears, views the Genesis mandate of “caring and tilling” as the virtuous purpose of humanity. Farming, he claims, is noble work that gives people a sense of meaning; while this assertion is undoubtedly true, it does raise the question of what value people have after their working years are behind them. Does a person idling about in a nursing home have less intrinsic value than the farmer who is making hay? Or does the missing chromosome of a child with Down’s Syndrome make her any less precious? What about people who are unemployed, or homeless, or disabled?

Reflecting on the value of his life as he approached its end, Oliver Sacks (1933-2015), a scientist and prolific author who contributed much to popularize neurology, revealed his perspective when he wrote, “it is up to me now to choose how to live out the months that remain to me. I have to live in the richest, deepest, *most productive* way I can” (italics mine). Tellingly, when confronted with his immanent mortality, Sacks

¹² Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?: Essays By Wendell Berry* (New York: North Point Press, 1990), 125.

pointed to productivity as the best way to live his final days. Remarkably, in an opinion piece published in the *New York Times* in the same month as his death, Sacks, an ardent atheist, borrowed Judeo-Christian language when he wrote:

[N]ow, weak, short of breath, my once-firm muscles melted away by cancer, I find my thoughts, increasingly, not on the supernatural or spiritual, but on what is meant by living a good and worthwhile life — achieving a sense of peace within oneself. I find my thoughts drifting to the Sabbath, the day of rest, the seventh day of the week, and perhaps the seventh day of one's life as well, when one can feel that one's work is done, and one may, in good conscience, *rest*¹³ [*italics mine*].

That shift in emphasis from productivity to repose indicates the surrender to a man's inevitable end, when work is no longer an option, and when death needs to be befriended and embraced.

In his incomparable and insightful way, American writer and theologian, Frederick Buechner (1926-) muses on the significant role of vocation for a flourishing life. He begins by returning to the etymology of the word, which

... comes from the Latin *vocare* [*italics mine*], to call, and means the work a man is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Super-ego, or Self-interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you need most to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. If you really get a kick out of your work, you've presumably met requirement (a), but if your work is writing TV deodorant commercials, the chances are you've missed requirement (b). On the other hand, if your work is being a doctor in a leper colony, you have probably met requirement (b), but if most of the time you're bored and depressed by it, the chances are you have not only bypassed (a) but probably aren't helping your patients much either.

Neither the hair shirt nor the soft berth will do. The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.¹⁴

¹³ Scott Neuman, "Oliver Sacks, Renowned Neurologist and Author, Dies at 82," *National Public Radio, The Two Way*, August 30, 2015, accessed August 30, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/08/30/436013382/oliver-sacks-renowned-neurologist-and-author-dies-at-82>

¹⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 95.

Buechner's assessment suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all answer to the question of human telos. Indeed, even identical tasks can carry a variety of meaning for the people doing them. Consider, as an example, the fictitious story of

... a traveler who talks with three stonecutters on a worksite in an English town. The traveler asks each what he is doing. The first says, "I'm earning a living." The second says, "I'm crafting a stone that will fit perfectly into that wall and make it strong." And the third stonecutter says, "I am helping Sir Christopher Wren build a magnificent cathedral to show the glory of God."¹⁵

Three people, doing the same work, but who each assign very different meaning to what they are doing. The first cannot see any value to his work beyond a paycheck; another views his work as merely utilitarian in nature; and still another understands it as a contribution to creating enduring beauty and sacred space. In other words, the meaning of work is lodged in how it is understood and interpreted. A cynic might attribute such variations of interpretation to spin, or propaganda, or even wishful thinking. However, viewing one's own contribution as a part of a greater good is often accompanied by a deep sense of satisfaction. Still, many of us ask, "is that all that there is for us?" We wonder, "is work the sole and ultimate source of meaning to our lives?"

Another perspective is represented by the Swiss psychologist Paul Tournier (1898-1986). In his book, *The Meaning of Persons*, Tournier argues a meaningful life lies in the intimacy of relationships. We are fundamentally relational beings, and so the fulfillment of our lives occurs in the context of our interpersonal relationships. However, given our tendency to sabotage interpersonal intimacy, he writes,

When I labour to liberate a crushed life, I am not fighting against God, but with him. Like a gardener who removes from around a plant the weeds that choke it,

¹⁵ Joseph L. Badaracco, *The Good Struggle: Responsible Leadership in an Unforgiving World* (Boston: Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation, 2013), 118.

using all the care that as one of God's creatures it deserves, I am helping to re-establish his purpose of life. It is God who gave it life, and he surely wants it to flourish and bear fruit. . . . Bearing fruit means being oneself, asserting oneself, growing in accordance with God's purpose.¹⁶

This emphasis on the intentionality and work required to make relationships satisfying is a perennially helpful reminder. Neglecting people, as with the neglect of gardens, can result in a host of "thorny" issues. In both cases, they require attention and care.

Reflecting on his life-altering experience as a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp in the aftermath of his bestial ordeal, Austrian physician Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), described the meaning of life as being situated in the fundamental struggle for survival. In his estimation, the people who were not sent to the gas chambers persisted under horrendous conditions and overcame despair because of a determined resolution to live. Motivated mostly by the desire to be reunited with family members, these prisoners ferociously clung to hope in the face of brutal conditions. Frankl wrote,

The thought of suicide was entertained by nearly everyone, if only for a brief time. It was born of the hopelessness of the situation, the constant danger of death looming over us daily and hourly, and the closeness of the deaths suffered by many of the others. From personal convictions...I made myself a firm promise, on my first evening in camp, that I would not "run into the wire." This was a phrase used in camp to describe the most popular method of suicide – touching the electrically charged barbed-wire fence. It was not entirely difficult for me to make this decision. There was little point in committing suicide, since, for the average inmate, life expectation, calculating objectively and counting all likely chances, was very poor.¹⁷

In echoing Nietzsche's claim that a person who has a *why* to live for can bear almost any *how*, Frankl affirmed that it was love that kept him alive, and love that kept him going. The memory of his wife sustained him through his tribulation, reminding him of the truth

¹⁶ Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), 227.

¹⁷ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1959), 16.

that there is no higher goal to which a person can aspire, no greater telos than love. “The salvation of man,” he concluded, “is through love and in love.”¹⁸

Looking For Love In All The Wrong Places

In complete opposition to the forced austerity of a concentration camp, hedonism seeks fulfillment through sensual pleasure. Food, sex, recreation and various other experiences stimulate the senses and satisfy human cravings. Among the modern mottos of a hedonistic approach to life is “if it feels good do it,” because “you only live once” (YOLO). However, as long and hard as some people will test this theory by gorging themselves on pleasure, most end up discovering the truth of what American pastor H.E. Fosdick (1878-1969) described when he wrote that “our basic problem is that we are self-centered.”¹⁹ Narcissus may have fallen headlong into a pool, but he is still very much alive and operative in people today.

A final perspective on human telos, though difficult to label with much precision, is represented by the African American community. Under harsh conditions, slaves in American’s southern states found solace in solidarity with the Israelites during their bondage in Egypt. Clinging to hope in a “promised land,” and a better future (usually conceived in eschatological terms), they sang songs rich in images of deliverance. Consider this exemplary portion of one of their hymns which alludes to the baptismal waters of the Jordan River.

¹⁸ Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1959), 36.

¹⁹ As quoted by David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015), 10.

Deep river, my home is over Jordan,
 Deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.
 Oh don't you want to go to that gospel feast,
 The promised land where all is peace?
 Oh deep river, Lord, I want to cross over into campground.²⁰

This longing and hope for a better future gave slaves the ability to persist, delaying gratification until their deliverance from earth to heaven was accomplished, through either their own death or the return of Christ. In other words, they were motivated to endure a difficult present in order to inherit a glorious future. This same confidence in eschatological hope for a better future, amid a troubling present, is yet operative in the modern civil rights movement to the present day.

This handful of examples provides an historical and philosophical cross-section of evidence that human beings have been engaged in a continual process of searching for the meaning to their existence. That such searching persists into the present age, along with its accompanying angst and dissatisfaction suggests that the successful pursuit of a meaningful life is both difficult and counter-intuitive. The consequences for how questions concerning human telos are addressed become enormous, even eternal, as is the choice of a metric for meaning making. Suicide represents the tragic ending to a life that has lost meaning, purpose, and hope. Evidence that suicide rates are holding steady²¹ despite the plethora of products, services and experiences promising a better life, points to the existential despair to which many people unfortunately succumb. Even more importantly, it points to the urgent need for a better answer to this age-old problem. There

²⁰ Delores Carpenter, ed., *African American Heritage Hymnal* (Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc. 2001), #605.

²¹ Of the more than 30,000 people who commit suicide in the U.S. each year, the most vulnerable demographic is in the elderly population. See Mary Mederios Kent, "In U.S., Who Is at Greatest Risk for Suicides?," Population Reference Bureau, accessed September 13, 2015, <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Articles/2010/suicides.aspx>.

has, perhaps, never been a time in human history accompanied by so great a crisis of identity, making the Gospel message as urgent as ever. Unfortunately, the methods employed by the church sometimes lack the substance needed to transform lives.

For example, over a period of a few months I jotted down the one-liners I came across when driving by churches in my community. Here is a sampling:

- Umbrellas needed: shower of blessings here!
- If you give the devil an inch he will become your ruler.
- CHCH. What's Missing? UR!
- Autumn Leaves; Jesus Doesn't!
- It's not about Presents but His Presence
- Prayer is like wireless access to God, but without the roaming fees!
- iPad? iPod? Try IPray!

These are embarrassing and facile attempts at being relevant. Even those churches that strive to offer something more substantive risk reducing the Gospel message to a bromide, as in these examples:

- We preach Christ crucified and resurrected.
- Passionate Faith and Theological Depth

The church can and must do better.

In a world rife with fugacious clichés, charming sayings on church reader boards, memes on Facebook, catchy advertising jingles, and one-liners on car bumpers, what is needed is not more cleverness or even innovation, but a recovery of a sacramental world-view. Human suffering remains normative, as does the search for meaning. What is needed is a robust theology which meets people precisely *in* their suffering. A sacramental framework has the potency to provide people with both meaning and tools for perseverance as they navigate the continuum of the human condition.

With all the options tried and still available to us, where do we hang our teleological hats in order to find meaning for our lives? Is our purpose to serve gods or

God; to apply ourselves to good work; to remain engaged in worthy struggles? Is it found in loving relationships; in hedonistic pursuits, or in eschatological hope? Or is the question and the quest simply an exercise in futility? The range of answers, of course, points to the lack of universal consensus.

With all the suggested and adopted ways of being, either through intention or by default, does one sign provide the most enduring framework for living with the greatest meaning and purpose? That is the question driving this present investigation. As a practitioner in the art of pastoring, I have found that the grace and the practice of baptism has the ability to both re-orient and re-purpose people for lives of meaning and abundance.

Conclusion

Historically, baptism has been understood in terms of Christian *initiation* – the entry point into the community, the rite by which a person is identified as belonging to the Body of Christ. *This initiation, however, is only the beginning point for discipleship, and the rich images of baptism are much more dynamic than static, more fluid than solid. This project therefore explores the “living waters” of baptism as a life-long identity in which to grow up, and a purpose out of which to live.* As we shall see, nobody arrives at a point of perfection in this life. Baptism, in other words, because it is complete only in death²², is an invitation to the ever-living waters – a lifestyle of living wet.

²² Calvin, echoing many of the early church fathers, wrote, “This we must believe: we are baptized into the mortification of our flesh, which begins with our baptism and which we pursue day by day and which will, moreover, be accomplished when we pass from this life to the Lord.” See John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1312.

In a complex world, many persuasive voices and compelling forces compete to answer the question, what are people for? This dissertation demonstrates how that question is answered by contemporary North American culture, by the biblical corpus and by the early church. In each case I will explore their contributions through the hermeneutic of baptism. I will then suggest some ways to integrate baptism for lives that are more abundant. As I hope soon becomes clear, one does not need to enter a church or even get wet to be “baptized”.

One caveat about this dissertation’s assumptions. Because this work is primarily about meaning, and the lived nature of baptismal identity, it will not give consideration to the various methods of administration that have been and remain controversial and divisive for the Church. For example, whether baptism should be carried out by submersion, immersion, affusion or aspersion²³ will not be addressed. Nor will it engage the question of whether baptism is most appropriately celebrated once or multiple times in a person’s life, or if standing, moving, local, or Jordan River water should be used. However, because of the crucial role early influences play in faith formation, consideration will be given (in chapter 5) to infant baptism. Pedobaptism, of course, has been a controversial topic throughout church history, and many of the church fathers argued against it, with concessions made in the case of the immanent death of children. With few exceptions (Cyprian being perhaps the most notable among them), the fathers, with their emphasis on the primary function and necessity of the washing away of sin, preferred credobaptism. All of these sub-topics have been the source of church conflicts, debates and schisms. With that qualification I wish to respectfully acknowledge the

²³ These are technical categories designed to clarify the methods of administration variously championed over time. See Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989), 33.

widespread diversity represented among the various traditions, all of which comprise the diversity of the Body of Christ. What follows represents my own selectivity vis-à-vis the emphases and angles I consider to be worthy of deeper consideration, ones which have emerged from my vocation of pastor, entrusted with the care and the cure of souls.

In the past I assumed that the purpose of mountains was for people to reach their summits. As a young boy I remember looking out the backseat window of a Dodge Dart, where I saw Mt. Rainier for the first time, and thinking to myself, “Someday I’m going to climb that mountain.” As it turned out it was a compulsion that led me to Liberty Crest, the summit, 14, 410 feet above sea level four times in young adulthood. Years later I learned that the Wonderland Trail completely encircles the lower mountain, and I completed a summer sabbatical by hiking it. Over the span of ten delightful days and ninety-three miles, I explored a variety of ecosystems, enjoyed a range of plant and animal life, and endured fierce weather conditions. At the end of the trail I found that I had become much more intimately acquainted with the mountain, an experience which deepened my appreciation for its rugged beauty and seismic power.

Just so, this dissertation takes a long, leisurely and somewhat circuitous route around the mountain of baptism to consider and to appreciate its massive capacity to form mere mortals into the image of God.

II. Cultural Baptism: The Church's Chief Contender

*For whatever reason, the soul is made of malleable material.
It forms itself around whatever material is informing it.
Unfortunately, the people who have the greatest influence in our lives
rarely understand the power of their words to shape who we become. They
never fully understand that what informs us forms us.*

~Erwin Raphael McManus, *The Artisan Soul*

*...at this very moment, and for as long as this world endures, everybody
inhabiting it is bowing down and serving something or someone – an
artifact, a person, an institution, an idea, a spirit, or God through Christ.
Everyone is being shaped thereby and is growing up toward some
measure of fullness, whether of righteousness or of evil.*

~Harold Best, *Unceasing Worship*

I have a friend who recently forgot to set the hand brake on her car when she parked on a steeply inclined driveway. When she returned to her vehicle she found that it had rolled down the driveway, harmlessly crossed two lanes of traffic, and come to rest in the ditch on the other side of the road. As her husband was relaying the story to me, he said, “Nancy never developed those driving habits early on that, after years of practice, become instinctual.” Such habits are what allow drivers to have the common experience of driving safely for miles on end, deep in thought, but with no recollection of the experience after arriving at their destination, even though they were checking mirrors, monitoring speed, and remaining alert to hazards.

Discipleship, like driving, requires such formative behaviors. Indeed, if followers of the Christ do not develop holy habits through a lifetime of practice in which behavior resonates with beliefs, we may end up worshipping (if not an outright false idol) a god who has been conflated with or compromised by the gods of capitalism, consumerism, and other forms of misplaced desire. As Leonard Sweet has recently written, “character is formed so subtly that our actions seem to be thoughtless – almost second nature.”¹

Such thoughtless formation can be either a bane or a blessing, depending on whether a person is influenced by vices or virtues, or what the Bible categorizes variously as “works of the flesh,” and “fruits of the Spirit” (cf. Gal 5:22-23). For lack of critical thinking skills and astute discernment, we are subject to a host of influences capable of malforming our character. Take for example the food industry in the United States: Through steady and long-term exposure to commercial advertisements, children are growing up to embrace diets high in sugars and fats, resulting in an epidemic of obesity,

¹ Leonard Sweet, *From Tablet to Table: Where Community Is Found and Identity Is Formed* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2015), 77.

along with an escalation of accompanying complications, most notably diabetes and heart disease. An image from the 1960's displays an infant happily drinking from a 7-Up bottle fitted with a nipple, along with the caption, "We have the youngest customers in the industry."² This, it could be said, is the food industry's version of "infant baptism." While much subtler today, marketing strategies are no less effective in converting people early on to a fast and convenient diet that is frequently embraced and sustained for a lifetime. Practice something long enough – sometimes in as little as six weeks – and it becomes a habit.

What remains hopeful in the face of bad habits, whether they are related to physical or spiritual health, is that there is rarely a point of 'no return.' Choices and changes can be made that represent health and holiness. Good habits can be formed, and bad habits can be reformed.

No living person is ever finished. We are ever in a state of "becoming,"³ and who we eventually *come to be* is influenced by an array of factors. Our exposure to these formative influences determines, for good and for ill, the type of people we develop into, and the quality of life we subsequently lead. For example, we know that contact with carcinogens frequently leads to developing cancer, and we know that a person who grows up repeatedly being told and showed that they are loved will typically become a loving person. Both nature and nurture, in their positive and negative manifestations, shape a person's identity. While I remain keenly concerned with those environmental factors, as a

² *Fed Up*, directed by Stephanie Soechtig (The Weinstein Company, 2014).

³ Keith Miller is the first person I know of to use the word in this way when he describes the evolving dynamic of a life in Christ as moving from one state to another, or what the apostle Paul described as "being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another" (cf. 2 Cor 3:18). See Keith Miller, *The Becomers* (Waco, TX: Word, 1973).

pastor my interest as well as my realm of influence lies more in the virtues and characteristics of Christian discipleship. In other words, I am interested in identifying the factors that form people into the likeness of Christ.

The Letter to the Hebrews contains a unique word that helpfully describes the nature of just such formation. Referring to Jesus, the author writes, “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3). “Exact imprint” is how the NRSV translates the hapax legomena *charakter*. It could be rendered as “mirror image.” The idea is that as we see Jesus, we are seeing God, and the implication is that as a person becomes acquainted with Jesus they become more like him. With origins in the ancient world, it is an image used to describe a die used in minting coins. When the die was pressed upon the metal it left behind an image of the king. The meaning of the word evolved from there to refer to anything that a person is exposed to; whatever presses upon us, affects who we become. This, of course, is where the notion of developing one’s moral character comes from. The Jewish philosopher Philo explained the word by saying that the “soul is like wax” on which various things can make either good or bad impressions. We become what presses upon us.⁴

I am of the belief that the liturgies of worship – broadly understood – are among the agents which have the greatest power to form people as citizens of the Kingdom of God. We will return to this topic in chapter four. For now I wish to explore how the prevailing liturgies in the world, along with their attendant values and influences, are operative and effective in the formation of people for a different kind of kingdom.

⁴ Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament: Abridged in One Volume* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 1308-09.

Without such a perspective it is much more difficult to recognize, and then to choose, the path to becoming holy. *Any understanding of the sacrament of baptism, along with an appreciation for a sacramental way of living – both of which represent my primary research interests – must be accompanied by an understanding of the contradistinctive values inherent in the surrounding culture.* It is impossible for us to fully realize what we stand for, until we also know what we are up against. The biblical call to repentance requires both a turning *from* and a turning *toward*. As William Willimon is fond of saying, “There are no unconverted people walking around. There is no neutral ground.”⁵ Everything we are exposed to, everything we participate in, forms us in some *way* for some *thing*, and that often unwittingly.

North American culture is a pitiable classroom when it comes to training people for lives of Christian discipleship. However, it is an excellent and effective environment for creating people who are (or who are becoming) devotees of the values inherent in a capitalistic economy, namely, the values of production and (especially) consumption. Fed by such things as exchange rates, output, and competition, the culture we inhabit reflects these pursuits, and by association, so do the people who embrace it. Such values, while so ubiquitous as to go mostly unnoticed, are largely corrupt metaphors when applied to most aspects of the life of faith. Said another way, these are false corollaries to baptismal identity. They might even be thought of as undercover agents, with a subversive mission to undermine the coming of the Kingdom of God.

While not new to our time and place, the clash of ethics between the kingdom of this world and the Kingdom of God, if not acknowledged, can create a fusion of values,

⁵ This is a direct quote from his keynote address at the gathering of the North American Association of the Catechumenate in Vancouver, B.C. on August 5, 2014.

significantly distorting and compromising the distinctive demands of Christian living and its call to repentance. This chapter seeks to demonstrate how environmental factors in the culture participate in the formation of people's identity and purpose. Indeed, if the world we inhabit is understood as a classroom to train us for a particular value system, the influences on our lives can be thought of as an implicit curriculum for the formation of our very souls. Relying on the insights of some of our most astute social critics, both living and deceased, I hope to provide a glimpse into the ways our secular context represents a formidable force for 'cultural baptism.' By intentionally using such liturgical language it is more likely that we will be able to recognize the fierce competitive energies at work, vying for our affections, our allegiance, and our very lives.

At the core of this awareness is the need to understand (here discussed briefly) the nature of desire. *Worldview* is typically the way we speak of a person's orientation to life, referring to their working assumptions about a value system: what is good, what is bad, what is desirable, and what is to be avoided. How a person arrives at those cosmological assumptions, convictions and conclusions is a complex process that involves a number of factors, most of which share the common ground in the nature of desire. For something so complex (as represented by such inquiries about it such as *is it natural, unnatural, good or evil?; what are its origins, and can it be tamed?*) desire may be identified by the simple, yet penetrating question Jesus once posed to a man whose heart was full of undirected desire: "What do you want?" (Jn 1:38 NIV).⁶ Getting the answer to that question correct is eternally consequential, and therefore deserves considerable

⁶ While the NRSV translates the phrase as "what are you looking for?" the word (*dzatew*) is just as often rendered with images belying a sense of "desire" or "want" ultimately referring to something that is being "aimed for." cf. Mt 12:46, Lk 17:33, Acts 16:10, 1 Cor 13:5, Gal 1:10.

examination, for what we desire and what we seek largely dictates the kind and quality of life we will pursue, both intentionally and unconsciously.

Summarizing the dilemma posed by such an inquiry, I agree with the convictions espoused by Paul Griffiths.

...we must begin with the fact that human desire has been deranged. Our desires have moved from order to chaos; they have been opened to the damnable as well as the beautiful. Following hard on the expulsion from the Garden (a place where both human desires and the things on which they focused were arranged beautifully and cultivated in accord with God's passions), the Bible tells us, Cain envied and killed Abel.⁷

Central to understanding the nature of desire is the sobering recognition that its telos can variously lead people to the formation, the malformation, or the actual conformation (in the sense that one thing becomes like another⁸) of their lives with respect to God. This is why it is of crucial importance to both *attend* and to *direct* desire.

Lacking such intentionality, the consequence for *neglecting* desire is that it is subject to being directed and manipulated by external sources. For example, if I live with a low-grade awareness that my life is missing something, and I'm looking for ways to find satisfaction, I will be apt to cling to both the messengers and their respective messages of how to achieve fulfillment. Additionally, if I don't know what it is I really want or need, I'll be more susceptible to suggestions of what those options might (in some cases "should") be. This is, of course, the driving force behind a culture which runs on the three-cylinder engine of *capitalism, consumerism, and success* turbo-charged by the universal and elusive longing for happiness. Desire has an insatiable appetite, but it

⁷ Paul J. Griffiths, "The Nature of Desire," *First Things*, December 2009, accessed December 4, 2014, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/12/the-nature-of-desire>.

⁸ This is how the Apostle Paul uses the word, in both positive and negative ways, in Romans 8:29 and 12:2.

will flourish on the fuel of any number of pursuits from such animal drives as hunger, sex, and power to so-called ‘higher’ aspirations of achievement, charity, and intellectual curiosity, as but a few examples.

In order to *direct* desire appropriately, we must have an understanding of what essentially motivates us, or what we might call the ‘seat of desire.’ Over and against the tenacity of the Cartesian view that we are primarily thinking beings, and are, therefore, shaped mostly by the information that enters our brains (“I am what I think”), I am persuaded that we are formed according to our cares: “I am what I love.” In other words, we are fundamentally people characterized by our affections. Included among the crucial questions for understanding personal identity and purpose, then, are:

- *How is my love being directed?*
- *Do I love rightly?*
- *Do I love the right things?*

The objects and pursuits of our desires are what philosopher James K.A. Smith (1970-) labels “liturgies.” The freshest voice on this topic today, Smith argues that we worship what we love, and it is our loves which, over time, form us as people to the point actually where “we are what we love.”⁹ Understanding this both personally and theologically is what led Augustine of Hippo (354-430) to describe the doctrine of *The Fall* as “disordered love.” Recognizing that love can be (and often is) misdirected allows us to make informed choices as to the object and re-aiming of our affections.

⁹ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 37.

Merely having our thoughts rightly informed isn't sufficient.¹⁰ We cannot simply "think" our desires in the direction of godliness. Instead, personal formation takes place through the liturgies of our affections. As Smith wrote,

The intimate link between bodily practices and our adaptive unconscious is a testament to the holistic character of human persons. We are not conscious minds or souls 'housed' in meaty containers; we are selves who *are* our bodies; thus the training of desire requires bodily practices in which a particular *telos* is embedded.¹¹

Necessarily then, we must determine what best engages the body in the development of values, Christian and otherwise. Conventional wisdom suggests that we are what we eat, or what we think, or what we believe; more accurately, I believe, we are what we *do*, assuming that we mostly do what we love. As powerful as ideas, self-talk and even beliefs are, it is the actual experience of something that most influences who we are and what we are becoming.

To understand just how this works we turn to some examples of cultural influences that are chief among the counter-formative agents opposing sacramental identity and purpose. Remarkably, in describing these operative influences, social critics often co-opt language typically reserved for distinctively Christian practices as a way to helpfully awaken us to the presence and the power of cultural liturgics. For example, Jeffrey Kaplan introduces us to "The Gospel of Consumption"¹² in which he takes us

¹⁰ This is the gross deficiency in Paul Ricoeur's memorable claim that "the symbol gives rise to the thought." While true insofar as it goes, it points, in turn, to the need for sacramental signs that have the power to motivate beyond mere thinking to actual behavior. See Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967), 347.

¹¹ James K.A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 62.

¹² The phrase references the notion that "people could be convinced that however much they have, it isn't enough."

behind the curtain of the enterprise of modern day American capitalism to reveal “how a 1930’s businessman made you a consumer.”¹³

Kaplan describes how, in this so-called “gospel,” the prophets of consumerism – as represented predominantly by the National Association of Manufacturers – launched a massive public relations campaign called the “American Way.” “The purpose of the campaign was to link ‘free enterprise in the public consciousness with free speech, free press and free religion as integral parts of democracy.’”¹⁴ This commingling of values has effectively integrated the values of the two kingdoms without distinction, often assigning the biblical language of “blessing” with the accumulation of possessions.¹⁵ In fact, part of the campaign was to reframe language in political terms. A booklet put out by an advertising agency claimed that under “private capitalism, the *Consumer*, the *Citizen* is boss...,” and “...he doesn’t have to wait for election day to vote or for the Court to convene before handing down his verdict. The consumer ‘votes’ each time he buys one article and rejects another.”¹⁶ This appears to be the origin of popular phrases used today such as “voting with my feet,” and “voting with my pocketbook.”

An inherently political assumption, along the lines of *inalienable rights*, accompanies the American Way of ‘consuming’ even our choices. Such consumer

¹³ Jeffrey Kaplan, “The Gospel of Consumption and the Better Future We Left Behind,” *Orion*, (May-June 2008): 40. The author references a 1929 magazine article written by Charles Kettering, director of General Motors Research, called “Keep the Consumer Dissatisfied.” He wasn’t, as Kaplan clarifies, suggesting that inferior products be produced. Rather “he was defining a strategic shift for American industry – from fulfilling basic human needs to creating new ones.”

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵ By contrast, Jesus’ so-called “Sermon on the Mount” describes blessing in much different, even anti-materialistic terms, including poverty. cf. Mt 5:3.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Kaplan, “The Gospel of Consumption and the Better Future We Left Behind,” *Orion* (May-June 2008): 43.

choices might even be considered ‘patriotic.’ After one hundred years of hearing this habitual message, most people believe it unquestioningly. Moreover, it has created important roles in our society to both maintain and to pass on the ‘faith.’

Providing a similar point of historical perspective on how we got here, the authors of *Slow Church* write that,

After World War I, corporations that had grown rich and powerful churning out war material and other mass-produced goods grew concerned about overproduction, concerned that the American people would be satisfied with what they already had. If people stopped buying things, the factories would go quiet and the boom years would be over. Paul Mazur, a prominent banker who joined Lehman Brothers in 1927, articulated the corporate response this way: “We must shift America from a needs to a desires culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things, even before the old have been entirely consumed. Man’s desires must overshadow his needs.”¹⁷

This bears no faint resemblance to the strategy of an evangelist in service to the god of capitalism, raising up disciples of consumption through the re-direction of desire.

Recognizing how people have intentionally been conditioned for an identity of consumerism, American media theorist Douglas Rushkoff (1961-) offers the following observation:

Of course, the consumer must never be allowed to reach his goal, for then his consumption would cease. The consumer must never feel completely at home in his present, or he will stop striving toward a more fully satisfied future. Since consumption makes up about half of all economic activity in America, a happy consumer would spell disaster. Fashion must change, and products must be upgraded and updated. In order for the economy to grow, this must keep happening faster.¹⁸

¹⁷ C. Christopher Smith and John Pattison, *Slow Church: Cultivating Community in the Patient Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2014), 180.

¹⁸ Douglas Rushkoff, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (New York: Penguin Group, 2013), 167.

To accomplish the goal of creating consumers, persuasive influences are needed. The best evangelists and disciplers in our society are our retail stores, fortified with elaborate and well-funded marketing campaigns. The retail industry has effectively displaced the rabbinic tradition in the formation of personhood. The masterminds behind this massive machine of formation are the marketing evangelists with messages like, “Re-imagine your life if you were to be in this car, in this house, in these clothes. How amazing it would be!” This is why celebrities become such important icons in secular discipleship – we associate their good looks, wealth, popularity and success with the products they endorse.¹⁹ This same observation led Peter Stanford to write that, “...virtually every cultural influence that youngsters are exposed to – whatever the efforts of their parents to filter them – is about acquiring, possessing and hence shopping.”²⁰ Perhaps we are living in an age of Revivalism after all!

With the prescience of a prophet (or perhaps a semiotician), Max Weber (1864-1920), the historical sociologist, predicted a related economic trend in the early twentieth century. However, and somewhat ironically, he was able to see how religion in general, and the Protestant Reformation in particular, played a key role in the rise of today’s business world with its reliance on consumerism as its lifeblood, even going so far as to credit – or blame – the Puritans with having created the suitable “soul” for capitalism. Recognizing the dangers that would result if left unchecked, he wrote,

The impulse to acquisition, pursuit of gain, of money, of the greatest possible amount of money, has in itself nothing to do with capitalism. This impulse exists

¹⁹ I am indebted to David Male who stimulated these ideas during a lecture presented to George Fox Evangelical Seminary’s SFS12 doctoral cohort in Cambridge, England, June 19, 2014.

²⁰ Peter Stanford, *The Tablet*, January 2010, 16. (As seen on a Leonard Sweet Facebook update status). Accessed June 10, 2014.

and has existed among waiters, physicians, coachmen, artists, prostitutes, dishonest officials, soldiers, nobles, crusaders, gamblers, and beggars. One may say that it has been common to all sorts and conditions of men at all times and in all countries of the earth, wherever the objective possibility of it is or has been given. It should be taught in the kindergarten of cultural history that this naïve idea of capitalism must be given up once and for all.²¹

Capitalism, one might say, capitalizes on desire, redirecting our affections, with money as its lover. Little wonder that Americans have been known to refer to currency in the somewhat blasphemous language of the ‘Almighty dollar.’

More recently, David Byrne made a similar, personal observation regarding the way people have been formed as consumers, along with its unsettling realization:

Now everyone has at least some understanding of the fact that they are being marketed to. Sometimes we still believe that we have magically ‘discovered’ something, but more often we are vaguely aware that someone made an effort to bring that artist or music to our attention. When I first noticed these hidden forces at work, I felt a little disillusioned. Realizing that something I really liked had been sold to me made me feel like some part of my free will had been usurped. I began to question the whole idea of free will and personal agency in my likes and dislikes – were they all manipulated according to someone else’s plan?²²

Indeed, we may be more conditioned than we would like to admit for identities as consumers through the hypnotic influences of marketers.

This peek behind the scenes of a massive, long-running propaganda campaign, directed by corporations and their marketing evangelists, reveals the forces still at work to convert people to the *American Way*, as defined by patterns of consumption and acquisition. This – I believe it is important to reiterate – is no slight bastardization of the *Jesus Way*.

²¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Mineola, MN: Dover Publications, 2003), 17.

²² David Byrne, *How Music Works* (San Francisco, CA: McSweeney’s, 2012), 215.

In addition to the ways people are being immersed and formed by consumer values and practices, baptism itself, as representing the holy alternative, has been misappropriated for secular, if not outright sacrilegious, purposes. Two examples, from two contemporary women – a politician and a performer – will suffice to demonstrate how baptism can be co-opted, though distorted and misused.

Criticizing so-called “liberal” politicians for being soft on threats to the American Way of life, Sarah Palin, speaking at a “Stand and Fight” gathering of the National Rifle Association said, “If I were in charge they would know that waterboarding is how we baptize terrorists.”²³ After thunderous applause, she went on to “thank God...” This conscription of biblical language for a political agenda, while nothing new, represents a gross distortion of values. The mere suggestion of associating the sacrament of baptism with torturing one’s enemies is egregiously offensive to Christian orthodoxy, reminiscent of a line in *Moby Dick* attributed to Captain Ahab when he tempered a barb in blood: *Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!* (“I do not baptize you in the name of the Father, but in the name of the devil!”).²⁴ The comment prompted the Reverend Ron Stief, executive director of the National Religious Campaign Against Torture, to condemn Palin’s comparison of waterboarding and baptism as “sacrilegious,” and called upon her for an apology.²⁵

²³ Aaron Blake, “Palin: ‘Waterboarding is how we baptize terrorists,’” *The Washington Post*, April 28, 2014, accessed May 7, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2014/04/28/palin-waterboarding-is-how-we-baptize-terrorists/>.

²⁴ Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, eds. Luther S. Mansfield and Howard P. Vincent (New York: Hendricks House, 1962), 484.

²⁵ Michael Gryboski, “Religious Groups Demand Sarah Palin Apologize for Saying ‘Waterboarding is How We Baptize Terrorists’” *CP (Christian Post) Politics*, May 1, 2014, accessed May 7, 2014. <http://www.christianpost.com/news/religious-groups-demand-sarah-palin-apologize-for-saying-waterboarding-is-how-we-baptize-terrorists-118947/>.

To see just how welcomed into the proverbial henhouse the cultural fox has been made to feel, one need look no further than one of today's pop icons. Lady Gaga, as much a priestess as an entertainer, has intentionally enlisted language previously reserved only for theologians:

‘Pop culture is my religion,’ she has remarked on several occasions, and it is a religious tradition she exegetes with flair; her music and imagery mine the canonical texts of Bowie, Madonna, Elton John and Prince, along with the sacred cultural repositories of sci-fi, glam, horror, high fashion and pop art.²⁶

Moreover, it isn't just the culture she exegetes. Borrowing biblical language and images on her album, *Judas*, she states ever-so-blatantly, “Let the cultural baptism begin.”²⁷ Additionally, a view of one of her music videos depicts her as alternately sprinkled, then immersed in water. This is, indeed, one of the high priestesses of cultural baptism, and a reminder of the ways the sacrament can be co-opted for secular purposes.

As Smith reminds us, fundamental to an honest evaluation of how cultural values ‘baptize’ us is an awareness of what we love. And as chronic idolaters,²⁸ we have the capacity to love and to worship virtually anything, money being perhaps the perennial favorite. Significantly, it is a subject the scriptures address with some frequency, warning of its grave, even mortal dangers, particularly when it becomes the primary object of our affections. The most explicit example is Paul's admonition to Timothy and to those under his care:

But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful *desires* that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the

²⁶ Brett David Potter, “Lady Gaga: Monstrous Love and Cultural Baptism” *Mediation*, May 15, 2011, accessed October 3, 2014. <http://theotherjournal.com/mediation/2011/05/15/lady-gaga-monstrous-love-and-cultural-baptism/>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Calvin described the nature of humanity as “a perpetual factory of idols.” See John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 108.

love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains. (1 Tim 6:9-10; italics mine).

Because of its insatiable appetite, capitalism requires an ever-expanding economy to be sustainable, and consumerism is the fuel that keeps it growing. It is a force that has far-reaching effects.

Related to the ever-present landscape of consumerism is the expansion of virtually everything from houses to waistlines. Big box stores like Costco encourage people to purchase more than necessary, to overindulge, to acquire well beyond actual needs. Fast food restaurants encourage us to “supersize” or to “go big.” The underlying marketing strategy of appealing to a desire for ‘more’ is the exploitation of our restless hearts, and the goal is the financial bottom line. Humorously, some people have taken this pursuit to a bizarre level of application. In an artistic movement known as “more-ing” or “a new kind of more” people can be found wearing multiple pairs of suspenders and underwear; basketball “trees” arranged with half a dozen baskets; cars with a sequence of identical hood ornaments; or doors with symmetrically installed deadbolts, most of them, presumably, non-functional.²⁹

As consumer values become increasingly normative in the ethos of society they inevitably affect ecclesiology as well. It therefore comes as no surprise that some congregations have followed similar trends, becoming so-called ‘mega churches,’ where even the buildings look more like warehouses than worshipping centers, and their missions, while not so explicitly stated, devolve into roles as “purveyors of religious

²⁹ Robert Krulwich, “A New Kind Of ‘More,’” NPR Spokane, September 10, 2013, accessed September 10, 2013, http://www.npr.org/blogs/krulwich/2013/09/10/220734400/a-new-kind-of-more?utm_source=npr&utm_medium=facebook&utm_campaign=nprfacebook.

goods and services.”³⁰ Slick marketing campaigns and other trends borrowed from the business world, I contend, have done little to lead people either down the path of righteousness or into deeper interpersonal relationships.

Reinforcing this concern that we are affected by what we are exposed to and what we practice, recent neurological research reveals the notion that we become what we do.

The repetition of physical experiences forms pathways, creating habits of familiarity.

James Geary summarizes the science:

Sensations, objects, and experiences repeatedly occur together with internal states, thereby becoming linked in our minds. . . . The more often clusters of neurons respond together, the stronger the connections among them become. If specific neuronal groups respond repeatedly over time to the same stimulus – anything to do, say, with Halle Berry – the connections become fixed. In neuroscience, this is known as the “neurons that fire together wire together” axiom.³¹

As we have seen, the liturgies in our world, habituated over time, and particularly as they shape the liturgical rhythms of our churches, form us for lives that are more suited for citizenship in the kingdom of this world than the Kingdom of God. That we are so deeply embedded in the world, so ‘at home’ in this culture, often results in this formation taking place in us often unawares. An understanding and a more conscious awareness of this covert phenomenon at work and in play is essential for people who are interested in being formed more fully in the way of Christ. Consumption, Production and Popularity: these are the ingredients of a cultural baptism which essentially says, “this is what you need in order to live the Good Life.” Far from being merely benign or even indifferent, these influences are enormously consequential for the quality of life a person is to have.

³⁰ This is such a common and memorable phrase that it is difficult to trace its origins. However, Darrell Guder is the person most frequently credited. See Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998).

³¹ James Geary, *I Is An Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How it Shapes the Way We See the World* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2011), 96.

Whether we know it or not, and mostly we don't, we are being continually, passionately baptized. Our immersion in and exposure to cultural liturgies form us more for consumerism than for Christianity.

Moreover, our baptism into cultural values not only forms us to become more dedicated and loyal citizens of the kingdom of this world, it also creates a simultaneous resistance to Christ and the values of his Kingdom. We cannot serve two masters at the same time, and we cannot hold dual citizenship in two kingdoms. A double-sided choice of resistance and surrender is required.

To summarize, individual Christians in particular and the Body of Christ as a whole must recognize that the Church exists in an environment that frequently contains values which clash with those of the Kingdom of God. Because of the incongruous relationship between the Culture and the Church, only a growing recognition and an ongoing vigilance of these two distinct value systems will allow us to eschew the one in favor of the other.³²

I agree with Walter Bruggemann, who said, "My charge would be to develop a well-informed critical capacity in order to see that what we regard as 'given' in our society is in fact a construct. When recognized as a construct, alternatives become

³² From its origins in the apostolic age, a long-running conversation has been taking place in the church with respect to its relationship with the surrounding culture. While I am aware of the dialogue that has been taking place, especially as it considers how Christians are to live faithfully in this world, my interest has more to do with identifying cultural forces that are shaping people for secular values, over and against those of the Kingdom of God. The focus of this dissertation is aimed at helping people to think and live *sacramentally*. For more recent examples of how the Christ and culture conversation has been developing, see James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and Leonard Sweet, et al., *The Church in Emerging Culture: Five Perspectives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

imaginable and possible.”³³ I would add that it is only with such a critical awareness that we are in a position to first choose, and then to participate in, the kind of baptism that will be formative for the kind of persons we wish to become.

What is clear is that the lifestyles into which the North American culture is baptizing us leave behind a trail of dehydrated souls. How is one to live wet?

³³Ken Wytsma, “Sabbath as Resistance: An Interview with Walter Bruggemann” (blog), October 20, 2014, accessed October 21, 2014, <http://kenwytsma.com/2014/10/20/sabbath-as-resistance-an-interview-with-walter-brueggemann/#sthash.VYXjONdN.dpuf>

III. Baptism in the Bible: The Watery Thread

Do you not know that those of us who were baptized into Christ were baptized into his death? We were buried, therefore, with him by baptism into death so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by glory of the Father so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

~Romans 6:3-5

When you went down into the water it was like the night and you could see nothing, but when you came up again it was like finding yourself in the day. That one moment was your death and your birth, that saving water was both your grave and your mother.

~Cyril of Jerusalem

I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea...

~1 Corinthians 10:2

Using biblical language, and capturing the simultaneous dynamic of beginning and becoming, I've yet to read an author who has expressed this holy gift as succinctly as Frank T. Griswald when he writes that, "Baptism is both a discrete event in a person's life and a life-long process of 'growing up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ' (Eph 4:15) and acknowledging with St. John that 'what we will be has not yet been revealed' (1 John 3:2)."¹ The beauty and the intrigue of baptism lies in its fathomless depth of meaning, as well as its wide-ranging implications for a life of discipleship. The word "fathom" by the way, while it is typically used as a unit to measure the depth of water, originates in the sense of "something that embraces," or "with outstretched arms."² Thus, while a literal fathom is six feet of water depth, the word has significant metaphorical implications for a person who embraces a lifestyle of living wet in the sacred waters of baptism. Used as a transitive verb, then, a person could say that they are seeking to 'fathom' or 'plumb the depths' of the baptismal mystery, and to live out of those deep, sacred waters in the lifelong "process of Christ,"³ the continual pandiculations in the exercise of faith. We will return to this concept in chapter four. For now we turn to the origins of baptismal images sprinkled throughout the Old Testament.

¹ Frank T. Griswald, "Toward a Baptismal Spirituality," in *Drenched In Grace: Essays in Baptismal Ecclesiology Inspired by the Work and Ministry of Louis Weil*, eds. Lizette Larson-Miller and Walter Knowles (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 218.

² Erin McKean, *The New Oxford American Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 613.

³ This is a phrase coined by the eighteenth century priest and mystic, William Law, as quoted in *Drenched in Grace: Essays in Baptismal Ecclesiology Inspired by the Work and Ministry of Louis Weil*, eds. Lizette Larson-Miller and Walter Knowles (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 218.

Showing Signs of Promise

Nearly every promise contained in the Holy Bible is accompanied by a sign. God makes a promise, and seals it with some kind of a sign as a reminder of that promise. Noah was the first recipient among many who received such a two-part gift when God made the promise to never again destroy the earth with a flood. That initial covenant of blessing was (and is) paired with the sign of the rainbow. The joining together of promises and signs (Word and Sacrament) are God's way of establishing and maintaining covenant with his people. Call them *promisigns*.⁴

The biblical *promisigns* primarily deal with both beginning and becoming. Everything that God initiates has intentions in perpetuity. Thus, the signs that have historically accompanied God's covenantal promises are with us to this day, things like rainbows, circumcision, tablets, bread and wine, and, most notably for the purposes of this chapter, water. In each instance, but culminating in the *promisign* of baptism, the holy invitation is to begin a new life with Christ, and to grow to be like Christ. A number of baptismal allusions located in the Old Testament, can be semiotically connected to New Testament texts. I begin there.

Creation: (Re)Signing Order out of Chaos

The first sentence of the Bible ends on a wet word: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep (Heb. *tehowm*), while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters (Heb: *mayim*)" (Gn 1:1-2). Significantly, according to the first creation account in

⁴ This is a portmanteau of my construction.

Genesis 1, five of the six days of creation include references to water (day four, with its focus on the lights, is the notable exception). But it doesn't end there. By the end of Genesis 2 there are more than twenty-two references to water. Water is the source, the beginning, the very origins of all of life. It is the stuff, in other words, of both beginning and becoming.

The nature of these waters is described by the writer as *tohu va bohu*. Typically translated as “a formless void,” the Hebrew phrase points to something that is hard to fathom, like “nothingness squared”; it is dark, moist, fertile – much like a womb – an environment readied for the embryonic development of life. Water is the genesis of life.

These inchoate and chaotic waters from which creation begins are evocative of deep mystery, and refer to a fertile environment for birthing. It is actually not a far etymological stretch (when used euphemistically) to describe them as seminal fluids,⁵ the hydroponic seedbed of life. Gregory of Nyssa made this connection, showing the cause and effect relationship between the life-giving sperm and the person who resulted. As Ferguson interprets Gregory, “Even as the power of God takes the moist sperm and makes a human being, so the power of God uses the water of baptism to make a corruptible human being into an incorruptible person.”⁶ Baptism hearkens back to these primal, procreative waters as the sign of the new creation in which God reclaims lives, restores relationships, once again bringing order out of chaos.

⁵ James Strong, *The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 65.

⁶ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 609.

Garden: Sign of our Origins

The second creation story (though believed to be an earlier version) is located in the center of a Garden which is watered by a stream. The text says that God formed man from the dust of the ground, but anyone familiar with the art of sculpture knows the dust needed to be mixed with some water in order to actually give it form, much like clay needs to be moistened before it can be shaped. It appears then, that the ingredients used in the making of humanity were the dust of the ground, the breath of God, and water.

There is a clear semiotic relationship that connects the combined creation stories to a unique Gospel incident located in John 9. Just as Genesis 2 depicts God kneeling down in the dirt (Heb: *adamah*), forming Adam from a mud pie, so too Jesus, imitates this creative act by spitting on the dirt, making a mud pie, smearing it on the blind-from-birth man's eyes, and restoring his sight, recreating him in the Imago Dei. With this one addition: Jesus sent the man to the pool of Siloam to get wet. In other words, the Sent One (Gk: *apostolo*) sent a blind man to a pool called Sent where he was healed, and then sent him back into his community to tell his story – one which has become something of a classic testimony: “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash. Then I went and washed and received my sight’” (Jn 9:11). For this unnamed blind man, his first seeing day marked the holy occasion of not only his healing-via-hydrotherapy, but his genesis of becoming an apostle – sent to speak Good News. This is the essential sign of our re-creation.

Similarly, one of the easily overlooked apostles is introduced to us in John 4 when Jesus interacts with the woman of Samaria in another watery text. The story is introduced by the Pharisees' observation that “Jesus is making and baptizing more disciples than

John” (v. 1). The word John here uses for water (Gk. *hudor*) appears no fewer than nine times in this pericope, alluding to its baptismal significance. Even without the mandate of being “sent” to proclaim Good News she “left her water jar and went back to the city, and said to the people, ‘Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?’” (v. 29). As a result of this unlikely apostle, one who received a new beginning around Jacob’s Well, and was sent to bear witness to her encounter with the Christ, “[m]any Samaritans from that city believed in him...” (v.39). Significantly, this story also concludes on a wet note as John shows Jesus then moving on to Cana, reminding his readers that this is “where he had changed the water into wine” (v. 46).

Returning briefly to the Genesis 1 account, we find there a description of the first day of creation involving the introduction of light to the world, which is later reflected in both the life and the words of Jesus when he said, “as long as I am in the world I Am the Light of the world” (Jn 9:5). In the great irony of the story, of course, a once blind man ended up ‘seeing’ Christ more clearly than all the Pharisees combined, as their view of the truth remained limited to the Mosaic Law (v. 28).

Noah: Sign in the Sky

The story of the Flood (Genesis 6-8) is a pivotal one for understanding both the lethal and the life-giving attributes of baptism. God’s decision to use a deluge to “blot out from the earth” (6:6) both the human beings and the animals he had created was prompted by the wickedness that was running rampant. This is the second indication that

God takes sin seriously and deals with it definitively (the first involving the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3:23).

Fortunately, death does not (ever!) get the last word in God's story. Recognizing the righteousness of Noah, he preserved a remnant of humanity and of animals. Buoyed above the destructive forces of the floodwaters, Noah and his shipmates of family members and animals were saved from death, preserved for life in the first Ark of the Covenant. Like baptism the flood story depicts an inner and an outer dynamic in which the container of the ark and the container of our bodies are wet on the outside, washed of sin, while simultaneously being dry on the inside, a safe sanctuary where salvation is effected. Then, with the receding waters came God's promise of "never again" (Gn 9:11), followed by the arc of the rainbow which became the sign in the sky of this covenant promise, a promise which yet today recalls the great story of the Deluge and reassigns it as the story of God's great Flood of love, inviting the baptized to live in the flood plain of grace.

Moreover, baptism can be seen as an invitation to re-enter the lost ark by a lost people, who get found in the saving grace of God, who is yet preserving a remnant⁷ people, not for destruction, but for salvation. The Apostle Paul, influenced by the prophet Isaiah, picks up on this theme in his letter to the church in Rome, writing, "Though the number of the children of Israel were like the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved..." (Rm 9:27). And again, "So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace" (Rm 11:5). By referencing the small fraction of the world's population that was saved in the ark, Paul is indicating that the waters of baptism are preserving a remnant

⁷ The first use of this word in the OT is in Genesis 45:7 when Joseph reassures his brothers, saying, "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors."

people for life. Moreover, the Apostle Peter picks up on this vivid image describing remnant theology when he writes of "...God waiting patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through the water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you..." (1 Pt 3:20-21).

Moses, more often associated with the Ten Commandments, reflects this sense of preservation-via-lifeboat when his mother waterproofed a papyrus basket and buoyed him out of harm's way in the Nile River. As the story is told he was later adopted by Pharaoh's daughter who named him *Mosheh* because "(she) drew him out [*mashah*] of the water" (Ex 2:10). The boy who, like Noah, was saved by floating on water, grew to save a whole people by leading them through the parted waters of the Red Sea, from a condition of Pharaoh-imposed slavery into a land of promise, and ushered them into a life of freedom (Ex 14). Again it is worth noting the lethal *wet* and life-giving *dry* images associated with this story, where the waters are parted for the Israelites, granting them safe passage and new life, and where the waters crashed in upon the Egyptian army destroying them as the enemies of God's chosen people.

Additionally, the story of deliverance from Egyptian bondage to the promise of freedom was remembered not so much as one of mere salvation, but of joy. The dominant tone of the Passover celebration to this day is accompanied by a spirit of joy. Eugene Peterson, commenting on the book of Ezra, observes that

...Passover wasn't a somber ceremony but a celebration. Rather than being sprinkled in a stoic ritual with smatterings of God's grace, the Jews were plunged into a sea of joy, coming up from their immersion in God's grace, splashing gleefully together in the water.⁸

One could hardly find a more appealing image for baptism.

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Conversations: The Message Bible With Its Translator* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2007), 665.

Abraham: Sign in the Flesh

While Noah was the recipient of a promise of *preservation*, Father Abraham received the gift of *multiplication*, a covenant promise that was accompanied by the sign of cutting. While covenant-making rituals commonly involved the cutting of animals (or in the case of Moses the cutting of stones), the Abrahamic promise was sealed with the sign of cutting the flesh – his flesh.

The promise it pointed to was that he would become “the ancestor of a multitude of nations” (Gn 17:4). For reasons that are never explained, God identified Abraham – in his old age no less – to be the patriarch of a people so numerous as to exceed the grains of sand. Unlike Noah, who seems to have been chosen precisely because he was a righteous man and “found favor with God” amid the great wickedness that had come to pervade the earth (Gn 6:8-9), Abraham appears not to have stood out in any significant way. Indeed, there is no mention of Abraham’s righteousness until *after* the promise was given to him one starry night when God invited him to, “Look toward the heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them. Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gn 15:5-6).

Abraham, it would seem, grew into righteousness as he lived into this covenant, much like latter day heirs to the promise come to the waters of baptism unworthily, and live into their identity as children of God. The Apostle Paul later points back to this example as a way to demonstrate the ways God justifies his people, writing,

We say, “Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.” How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of

the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised (Rom 4:9-11).

Circumcision, as Paul reminds us, was the sign of the multiplication promise given to Abraham. Because of the human anatomy involved it is a topic that has often been too quickly, bashfully turned away from, avoided out of embarrassment. Yet that is almost the point: it is so intimate, and so sensitive as to remind us that our life in Christ – far from being some sort of ultra-spiritual, Gnostic-like belief system – is deeply personal. It cuts to the quick. It meets us in the flesh. It touches a nerve. Furthermore, unlike the occasional sign of the rainbow, Abraham would have been reminded of his promise every time he “made water,” presumably several times a day, giving him occasion to give thanks to God.

The way this promise began to be fulfilled was no slight thing. Significantly, only the God who made the promise could keep the promise. God chose – as the unlikely (and medically impossible) place for the birthing of this promise to take place – a geriatric womb that had failed for nearly a century. So implausible was this divine birth announcement that it caused Sarah to have a good laugh over the mere thought. But when the child was born, tickled that they were finally parents, the old couple kept their laughter alive by naming their son Isaac.⁹

If it weren't for St. Paul's theological redaction of the Abraham story we might not see this as yet another prefiguring of the baptismal covenant. While there are allusions to this in his letter to the Romans the explicit language shows up in his letter to the Colossians:

⁹ This is a play on the Hebrew words *yitschaq* (Isaac) and *tsachaq* (laughter).

In him also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision,¹⁰ by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ; when you were buried with him in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead (Col 2:11-12).

The Abrahamic covenant, it can be said, prefigures the New Covenant as it cut out a remnant people from the world, enabling them to make the ‘final cut’ for salvation.¹¹

Moses: Sign in the Stones

Apart from his association with water, first as an infant in the Nile and later as an adult in the Red Sea, Moses initially seems an unlikely precursor to baptism. But notably when God appeared to Moses to give him the Ten Commandments, he came shrouded in the vaporous waters of a cloud, saying to him, “Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people” (Ex 19:10-11). It is Origen, with his sacramental nose, who helps us to see that the command to wash their garments means that “Your garments were washed once when you came to the grace of baptism; you were purified in body; you were cleansed from all filth of flesh and spirit.”¹² But Paul noticed this first, writing, “...our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea...” (1 Cor 10:2).

Even more significant is the cutting image that spans the two testaments, providing a semiotic way of connecting covenantal language, old and new. Most

¹⁰ The Greek word, *axeitropoihtos*, refers to a circumcision “made without hands.”

¹¹ cf. Rev 20:11-15.

¹² Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 411.

explicitly is the convergence of images demonstrated in Paul's letter to the church in Rome when he references Abraham and his first-covenant descendants, along with the new-covenant remnant, to show how Gentiles in Christ have been grafted (cut into) Israel – the chosen people of God (Rm 11). If one is willing to mix the physiological, the lithological, the horticultural, and the theological images, we can see that each of these promissigns is part of the whole, with the Abrahamic (flesh-cutting), the Mosaic (stone-cutting), the Pauline (branch-cutting), and the Messianic (heart-cutting) covenants grafting us into the Body of Christ.

Jonah: Sign of the Fish

The story of the minor prophet Jonah, while memorable because of its vivid, dramatic images, has been largely overlooked as a foreshadowing of baptism, but it hasn't always been ignored. A favorite image in older European baptisteries depicted Jonah rising up and out of the belly of a great fish against a watery background. For example, the bronze panel for a baptistry in Cologne, Germany makes explicit this connection. "The waters resemble the waters of baptism, the whale resembles a font, and Jonah stands as one raised to new life."¹³

Jonah's contribution to the corpus of baptismal theology lies in the inside-out theme of salvation and destruction. Similar to Noah and the ark, the days Jonah spent within the great fish preserved his life. Not only does Jonah's story look back to Noah's, but it also anticipates Jesus, who spent three days deep within the earth. It is these (relatively brief, three-day) gestational periods that ushered first Jonah and then Jesus

¹³ Regina Kuehn, *A Place For Baptism*, ed. David Philippart (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 119.

from death to life, metaphorically in the former instance, and quite literally in the latter. In Jonah's case, the reluctant prophet was swallowed alive by the great *ixthus*¹⁴ who spit him out three days later. The man that emerged was a different man than the one who was swallowed whole. Three days in the belly of a great fish gave Jonah time to think about his life with respect to his relationship with God, and his holy calling to be a mouthpiece for God. That was just enough time to change everything: his heart, his mind, his direction.

Similarly, the three days Jesus spent in hell (a baptism of fire) was just enough time to rearrange humanity's relationship with sin, and to overcome the power of death. In both cases the gestational environment for new life was a dark, mysterious place. We do not know exactly what happened in those respective 'bellies,' but we know that something significant transpired as demonstrated by the changes in the men who emerged. Namely, Jonah came out a repentant man, as evidenced by the new direction he went; Jesus came out of his tomb, ascended into heaven, and thus rearranged the spiritual forces of the universe through a cosmic turnabout, bringing to an end the power of death.

During his earthly tenure there were numerous requests – demands, even – for a sign that would validate Jesus' messianic identity. Matthew cites two typical examples: “Then some of the scribes and Pharisees said to him, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you’” (Mt 12:38). On another occasion something very similar took place when “the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven” (Mt 16:1).

¹⁴ The Greek word for “fish” is also a popular five-letter acronym that identifies Messiah: *Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior*.

According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus consistently resisted such tests of his identity, insisting that all the evidence they needed was already at hand. Pointing back to a little, wet prophet, he said,

An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the sea monster, so for three days and three nights the Son of Man will be in the heart of the earth. The people of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah, and see, something greater than Jonah is here! (Mt 12:39-41).

By invoking the memory of Jonah Jesus was giving his hearers a short-hand sign of what happens when people, upon hearing the Word of God, turn from their sin and turn to God. Just as the Ninevites will “rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the proclamation of Jonah...” (Mt 12:41) so too will those who repent of their evil ways go from being the condemned, to participating in the condemnation of evil. Baptism is the sign of this flip-flopping relationship between sin and condemnation, as it incubates people for a new life in Christ, transforming them – Jonah-like – from lives and lifestyles of running away from God, to lives of running after God.

It should be noted that the Fourth Gospel describes signs quite differently, even favorably,¹⁵ portraying them as evidence of who Jesus is. The Evangelist has no fewer than a dozen references to the miracles that Jesus performed as signs (Gk: *semeion*), pointing to him as the bona fide Christ, specifically including the miracle at Cana (Jn 2:11), the healing of the boy in Capernaum (Jn 4:54), the feeding of the five thousand (Jn

¹⁵ Similarly, the three initial signs that God gave to Moses (turning his staff into a snake and vice versa, making his hand alternately leprous and healthy, and transforming Nile River water into blood) were given to help the Israelites believe that God had commissioned Moses to lead them out of Egypt (Ex 4:1-9).

6:14), and the raising of Lazarus (Jn 12:18).¹⁶ These are but a sampling of all that he did, for John tells us that, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:30-31).

Creation, rainbows, circumcision, tablets, and a fish: these are primary among the signs which point to the promise that we are living in an age of promise, or what is known to astrologists as the Age of Aquarius. Though clearly outside the realm of a Christian cosmology, the sign of Aquarius is associated with the constellation known as the Water-bearer in the cosmos, believed by some to signal a period of peace and harmony. According to astrology, we are presently living in the Age of Aquarius; we are living under the sign of water. That water is a universal theme that gets expressed even in mythology points to the sacred thirst that pervades the human condition. Whether they are signs in the skies or signs in the ground, signs in stone or signs in the flesh, all of these signs ultimately point to the sign of Emmanuel – God with us.

In a world where it is easy to lose one’s way, we are given these re-orienting signs of promise which define and direct us toward life at its best. These promises point to the enduring faithfulness of God – and beyond, to the sign of the New Covenant – enacted in baptism, and embodied in Christ, the focus to which we now turn, by following the sacred waters as they flow into the New Testament.

¹⁶ Traditionally, the Church has identified seven specific “signs” in John’s Gospel. In addition to those mentioned above are the stories of Jesus walking on water (6:16-35), the healing of the blind man (9:1-41), and the healing of the paraplegic by the pool of Bethesda (5:1-18).

Storied Waters

We usually think of the containers for stories being words, whether conveyed through voices or books, spoken or written words. However, the storied waters of baptism are a different kind of container, with the ability to re-write and re-tell stories-gone-bad with a redemptive ending. Water carries God's story, my story, the community's story – past, present, and future – through the generations. It is the vehicle of Good News, the agent of salvation.

Asked what they think of when invited to make an association with Baptism and the Bible, most people will point to one or the other bookends of the Gospel: the Baptism of the Lord or the Great Commission. Mark is the Gospel writer who makes the connection most explicitly, describing Jesus' own baptism in chapter 1, and his commissioning of the eleven in chapter 16: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved..." (vv.15-16).¹⁷ Significantly, both of these incidents are recorded as stories, suggesting to us that the baptismal story – the watery thread that meanders throughout the salvation narrative – demonstrates how this sacred narrative redeems and redirects the lives of people whose stories have gone terribly wrong. In other words, not only does it represent the overarching span of the biblical story from beginning to end, but it marks and defines, even restores people within the New Covenant from beginning to end.

¹⁷ This lesser-known version of the Great Commission located in the longer ending of Mark's Gospel is worth noting because it is accompanied by indicators to supposedly confirm the veracity of people who are saved. Jesus said, "and these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover" (16:17-18). These signs, in other words, accompany those who are *bona fide* Christians. That these signs are not typical of the Church in the West is something I wish to here acknowledge, but not now explore.

Significantly, the Gospel of Jesus Christ does not start with Jesus, but with John the Baptist, who first issued the call for a baptism of repentance.¹⁸ It was by this sign that the arriving Kingdom of God began to demonstrate how it is that God can “raise up children to Abraham” (Mt 3:9, Lk 3:8), thereby grafting new people into a (re)new(ed) covenant. The sacred waters of baptism – through their universal, expansive, global effects (including Jews and Gentiles) – floods the world with salvation, reconstituting the earth’s inhabitants as the *chosen* people of God.¹⁹

The beginning of the Good News begins with water. Mark did not start his story, the way many of us begin our stories, and the way Matthew and Luke began telling their version of this same Good News story, with birth. He begins it, rather, with baptism. The beginning of Good News, he insisted, begins with water – more precisely, the local Jordan River waters in which Jesus was baptized.

According to Mark, the Word-Made-Flesh didn’t utter a blessed word until he was baptized. Not until after his baptism did Jesus formally begin his ministry of calling and making disciples. For Jesus and for all who follow him baptism celebrates both the “at handedness” of the Kingdom of God, as well as the full participation of the believers in that new way of life.

¹⁸ St. Mark is the Gospel writer who emphasizes this most notably, using baptismal language six times in the first nine verses of his account (in contradistinction to Matthew and Luke who both wait until chapter three to introduce the concept).

¹⁹ The underlying meaning of being chosen (Gk: *eklektos*) conveys a sense of divine favor. I contend that the “baptismal cloud” out of which the voice spoke that particular word to Jesus at his transfiguration (Lk 9:35) resounds throughout the New Testament to indicate how baptism identifies a *choice people*, chosen by God. cf. Rm 11:5, Col 3:12, 1 Th 1:4, and 1 Pet 2:9.

Following are five perspectives revealing how the sign of baptism, as revealed in the New Testament, is operative in the unique conditions of peoples' lives, each episode contributing something unique to a sacramental worldview.

John the Baptist: Sign in the Water

Echoing and recapitulating the opening phrase of scripture, "In the beginning" (Gen 1:1), the Good News of Jesus Christ, according to John's Gospel, signals its re-creative purposes by calling people to return to their origins, as if to say, "it's time to begin again." Significantly, both the story of creation and the story of salvation begin with water.²⁰

It is important to notice that the water in Mark 1 is the same as the water in Genesis 1 in order to make the necessary connection between creation and re-creation. The world contains a finite amount of water and it cycles through its life in the forms of solid, liquid and vapor, but it is all the same water, none of it more special or holy than others. The water used in today's baptismal fonts is no newer than the water over which the Spirit of God hovered when the world was still an empty womb. The water ebbing and flowing in oceans today is the same water that buoyed Noah's ark. The water in a glass of tap water could very well contain some of the same molecules that Jesus turned into wine at a wedding in Cana almost two thousand years ago. Life begins with water. Stories of life and stories of new life begin with water.²¹ Not surprisingly, then, the

²⁰ The Heidelberg Catechism helpfully dispenses with any magical or even salvific associations with baptismal water, describing it as "only a divine *sign*..." (4.078).

²¹ This is why astronomers get so excited when they find signs of water on distant planets – because if there is water to be found, chances are good that there is also life.

beginning of most everything that God initiates involves water. Our life began in water, and our new life in Christ begins in water. We are created in water, we are re-created in water, and we are renewed in water.

John the Baptist was given the assignment as the forerunner to Jesus, preparing people to hear, to receive and to respond to the invitation to begin again in God's new creation by stepping into the Kingdom of God. While his voice issued its prophetic call to repentance in the dry conditions of the Palestinian wilderness, the invitation was to get wet in the river that runs through it. His message, thundering from that arid environment, called people to leave behind their parched souls, by turning to the Living Waters.²² John's is a timeless message of repentance in a dry land, pointing to the oasis of salvation.

As with every effective metaphor and sacramental symbol, John used something common and ordinary, and yet essential: water. While his voice bellowed a message of repentance, his hands dunked people in the Jordan River as a sign of a dramatic, definitive turnabout, as they left behind (through figurative 'drowning') their old life, and embraced a new way of life in Christ with their first new breath as they emerged from the waters, refreshed, renewed, re-named in the tri-fold Name.²³ John was the quintessential Aqua-Man. Ironically, the one who presumably baptized more people than anyone else in the world was never, as far as we are told, himself baptized.

John's baptism was accompanied by a clarion call to repentance. Both Matthew 3:7 and Luke 3:7 report John's prophetic admonition almost identically: "You brood of

²² cf. Jesus' self-referential language that appears in John 4:10.

²³ To be sure such Christological and Trinitarian understanding can only be assigned to John's baptism subsequent to the Ascension.

vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit(s) worthy of repentance.” The Gospel according to Mark conveys the same message, though less directly: “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mk 1:4). John’s words and his baptism of repentance not only prepared people to receive Messiah, but also prepared the church for a ministry of Word and Sacrament. These are the essential means of grace given in service to the Gospel: in spoken words and through common matter the church is continually calling and inviting people to repentance, turning from their sins, turning to their Maker. The Baptizer summons people to embrace a lifestyle of repentant discipleship.²⁴ A repenter, therefore is one who is continually engaged in the life-long process and progress of daily transformation – both in identity and in practice – variously conceived as turning from sin to Christ, from death to life, or as one who is incarnating a palindromic lifestyle from ‘Evil’ to ‘Live.’ This is the essence of practicing one’s baptism.²⁵

Jesus: Sign of God-With-Us

Unlike John, Jesus was baptized. As the one person in the world, due to his sinless nature, who did not need to be, Jesus insisted on being baptized, thereby galvanizing his

²⁴ Against the notion that John’s message was something novel, the prophetic call to repentance is as ancient as Isaiah’s call to “wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from my eyes; cease to do evil...” (Is 1:16).

²⁵ I once heard of a man who, when asked where he went to church said, “I am currently practicing my baptism at St. Leo’s.” The language helpfully implies a progressive movement toward something that has not yet been fully attained, thus requiring steady vigilance lest the gift be neglected, and the goal imperiled.

resolve to fully condescend as Emmanuel: God-With-Us, and God-For-Us, demonstrating, moreover, that it is a gift for all humanity, and not to be ignored.

On the one hand, the baptism of the Lord was an exercise in utter humility, as captured powerfully in the parallel construction of Theodotus, a fifth century bishop of Ancyra: “The Master comes to the servant, the King to the soldier, the One who needs nothing to the one in need, the Giver to the borrower, the Reality to the shadow, the Word to the voice, the express image to the type.”²⁶ It is the very image of condescension and *kenosis*.

On the other hand, his baptism was, unlike some of the more humble moments of his life, a big deal, grand and glorious. For as the Synoptic Gospels describe, on the day of his baptism the heavens were opened and from them the divine voice issued a word of affection, (“beloved”), a word of identity (“my son”), and a word of pleasure (“in whom I am well pleased”).²⁷ As the voice of God spoke from the heavens at Jesus’ baptism, it is significant to notice that it was not his proper name that was used, but rather his relationship to the Father that was expressed: “this is my beloved *Son*, ...” The Letter to the Hebrews reflects this priority of identity by referring to the relational “Son” in chapter one, the name “Jesus” in chapter two, and the title “Christ” in chapter three. Baptism is primarily about the celebration of this restored son and daughter relationship to the Father.²⁸

²⁶ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 745.

²⁷ cf. Mt 3:17, Mk 1:11, and Lk 3:22.

²⁸ Similarly, we see this emphasis on relationship over name (or even role) in the burning bush episode. When Moses asked God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” God responded, “I will be with you” (Ex 3:11). It is that divine companionship with people that provides and insures their fundamental identity. This also reinforces the significance of Jesus as *Emmanuel*.

Moreover, the gratulation which God expressed for all to hear *preceded* Jesus' ministry, rather than being a *response* to it. This chronology is essential to notice in order to avoid any transactional associations with the event. In other words, baptism is not given in exchange or as a reward for good works, but as a gift that is prompted by the pure delight God takes in his children, a grace that then propels people to priestly and prophetic roles in the Kingdom.

A sermon by Ephraem suggests the important relationship between the baptism administered by John to the people in general, and to Jesus in particular.

John had been whitening the stains of debt with common water, so that bodies would be fit for the robe of the Spirit imparted by our Lord. Therefore, since the Spirit was with the Son, he came to receive baptism from John to mix the Spirit, which cannot be seen, with water, which can be seen, so that those whose bodies feel the wetness of the water should be aware of the gift of the Spirit in their souls, and that as the outside of the body becomes aware of water flowing over it, the inside of the soul should become aware of the Spirit flowing over it.²⁹

In addition to dignifying water (thereby also sanctifying those who are bathed in them), and establishing the necessity of the sacrament, Ephraem – who is here typical of patristic theology – demonstrates the evolution of salvation from the lesser to the greater. While John merely used plain water, Jesus added the Holy Spirit. Just so, John, by his own testimony had to decrease, so that Jesus could increase (cf. Jn 3:30). Amazingly, Jesus later went on to declare that “whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do *even greater things* than these, because I am going to the Father” (Jn 14:12; NIV, italics mine).

Perhaps the most significant thing about Jesus' own baptism has been suggested by Cyril of Alexandria, whose comments on the event is among the longest of the church

²⁹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 503.

fathers. With his primary focus not on the baptism itself, but on the descent of the Spirit, Cyril points to the role of *ruach* in Genesis 2:7, when the Spirit of God breathed the life of God into Adam, animating the man of dust, rousing him for a vocation of gardening. It is, of course, that same Spirit who rested on Jesus at his baptism, the very same Spirit who resides in those who are subsequently baptized in his name. This emphasis honors the important connection made to Nicodemus one night when he insisted that “...no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit” (Jn 3:5). Becoming like Christ is to behave like him: wet and winded.

Baptism is the means by which people are able to fully participate in the Incarnation – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. As Keating summarizes, “For Cyril, the recovery of the divine image in us is not simply the recasting of our deformed nature; it necessarily involves the reacquisition of the divine life through the Spirit which was given in the original creation.”³⁰ The baptism of Jesus, in other words, signals the re-entry of the Creator into the disordered Garden, beginning the work of recapitulation. By implication, baptism is the sacramental way we enter into solidarity with the Master Gardener, and his summons for all who follow him to tend the Garden of this world he is presently re-creating through the Holy Spirit. “The baptism of Jesus, therefore, was a sign, revealing that ‘the reacquisition of the Spirit’ meant ‘the sanctification of the human race in Christ.’”³¹

This sign of God-With-Us, given to the world at the baptism of our Lord, relates to other signs that accompanied his life. While Jesus was still bedewed from the

³⁰ Daniel A. Keating, *The Appropriation of the Divine Life in Cyril of Alexandria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24-25.

³¹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 689.

embryonic fluids of his mother's womb, shepherds were alerted to his birth by a unique sign: "...you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (Lk 2:12). Moreover, on the day that Jesus was first brought to Jerusalem an old man named Simeon blessed Jesus and then told Mary and Joseph that their "child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed..." (Lk 2:35). Even the way he died was *significant*. According to Mark, immediately after Jesus took his last breath a centurion said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mk 15:39). In other words, signs were associated with Jesus' life from beginning to end, from his life until his death. However, the preeminent sign was the presence of the Holy Spirit accompanying Jesus throughout his ministry. For just as the Father gave the Spirit to Jesus at his baptism, so Jesus commended his spirit back into the hands of the Father at his crucifixion (cf. Lk 23:46).

Perhaps no sign was more universal than when Jesus pointed toward water. In John's Gospel, Jesus can be heard issuing a number of wet invitations: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit" (Jn 3:5).³² It is not likely a coincidence that when Jesus gave instructions to the disciples for their Passover preparations, the singular sign he gave them was to find a man in the city carrying a jar of water (Mk 14:13ff). Moreover, on the last day of the festival, the great day, while Jesus was standing there, he cried out, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me,

³² Ferguson observes that this "is the most commonly used baptismal text in the second century." See Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 218.

and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’” (Jn 7:37-38).³³

While our best manuscripts don’t include the (likely legendary) detail about an angel of the Lord stirring up the water adjacent to Jerusalem’s Sheep Gate, so that whoever was first in the pool would be healed (Jn 5:4), it does offer a noteworthy theological insight that some scribe wanted us to see. Perhaps the intention was to help us make a semiotic connection back to the *mayim* of Genesis 1, a word which, significantly, is founded on a Hebrew root with the meaning “to agitate,”³⁴ suggesting the discomfiting demands baptism makes on a person’s life. More vigorous than vapid, the waters of baptism usher people into lifestyles that engage both the struggle against evil, as well as the demands of love – a life that Jesus demonstrated courageously and beautifully, while hardly comfortably.

Paul: Signs of the New Creation

Paul, a man of passion and extremes, represents one of the more compelling and dramatic personal stories of just such a new life in Christ. Indeed, it could be said that he incarnated the drama of a conversion from enemy of God to friend of God. The turning point occurred for him on the road to Damascus as he was en route to incarcerate some Christians as part of his zealous mission to destroy the fledgling church (Acts 9:1-30).

³³ Zechariah 14:8, with its reference to “living waters” may be the text Jesus is referring to although it is far from a direct quote.

³⁴ The word is transliterated as *huwm*, and can also mean “to make an uproar.” *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Hebrew and Chaldee Dictionary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 32.

Saul (as he was first known) spent three days in darkness after his blinding encounter with Jesus, who intercepted him and his plans. During that time, Luke tells us, he did not eat or drink. Significantly, following those three days of deprivation when no light, no food and no water entered his body, after Ananias laid hands on him and restored his sight, the first thing that Paul did was not to drink or eat. The first order of business was to be baptized. This, I suggest, was the pivotal moment in the apostle's life. Far more than something merely symbolic or cosmetic, Paul's baptism encapsulated a change in his mind, a change in his heart, a life-change and a name-change that involved a tectonic shift in identity and purpose. His previous identity and mission as persecutor was completely antithetical to God's purposes. Only after his baptism was his life mission re-synchronized by the Holy Spirit, and set on a new course, with a new name, a new identity and a holy purpose. When doubts or fear crept into his thoughts in the years ahead, that baptismal event most certainly was the anchor point to which he reestablished his moorings.

Influenced by his experience of blinding and seeing, darkness and light, death and life, the Apostle Paul's unique contribution to baptismal identity is through his emphasis on *dying* and *rising* with Christ. I will illustrate this with two examples.

First, in his letter to the Galatians Paul wrote personally, as one who had integrated the comprehensive effects of baptism: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (3:20). Similarly, in his letter to the Romans he posed this most penetrating of rhetorical questions:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been 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. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Rm 6:3-5).

In both examples, the juxtaposition of life and death is lifted up as the central, crucible focal point of the Christian life. A baptism into the life of Jesus requires following the way of the cross, becoming dead to sin as the necessary and ongoing prerequisite to becoming alive to Christ. A great deal of scripture needs to be overlooked or misinterpreted if one is to miss this emphasis on self-renunciation, and the death of the self. The waters of baptism are lethal before they are life-giving, and necessarily so.

Perhaps no other book in the Bible lends itself to being a text for baptismal theology better than the letter to the Ephesians. Although the word occurs only once (4.5), the letter is saturated, so to speak, with the concept of baptism. Perhaps most representative is the author's doxological gush of a prayer: "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth (Gk: *Bathos*), and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph 3:18-19). It's not hard to imagine St. Paul³⁵ here operating out of an expansive, sacramental lens as he prays for the Ephesians, probing the fathoms of baptismal identity. *Bathos*, by the way, is the same word that Luke uses when Jesus instructed Simon to "[p]ut out into the *deep water* and let down your nets for a catch" (5:4), and it may well be that the apostle had the Sea of Galilee in mind as a container of thirty-three fathoms of water. Living out of the depth of God's

³⁵ I am aware that the majority of mainline biblical scholars today dispute Pauline authorship. I attribute the book to him, nonetheless, in the spirit of apostolic authority.

love, it could be said, is akin to taking a “bath”: it invites us to go to the deep end of the baptismal pool.

Second, Paul made a similar gush of praise over the blessed mysteries of God in his letter to the Romans: “O the depth (*bathos*) of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (11:33). And so while the literal use of the word fathom occurs only in the Acts of the Apostles (27:28), its metaphorical meaning referring to the depth and richness of God’s gifts appears throughout the Bible, springing up and out, I would suggest, from the primal *tehowm* of Genesis.

To find a more figurative and enticing use of the word one need only consult the deuterocanonical book of Sirach which says, “. . . nor is it possible to *fathom* the wonders of the Lord” (18:6). And again, “The first man did not know wisdom fully, nor will the last one *fathom* her. For her thoughts are more abundant than the sea, and her counsel deeper than the great abyss” (24:28-29, italics mine). The Greek word (*orguia*) used here literally means “a stretch of the arms,”³⁶ and so it would seem that in his letter to the Ephesians, the apostle is implicitly referring to baptismal living as he calls the saints to grow up in Christ – that life-long process of “stretching” from the person we are to the Person who is being formed in us. Moreover, as bodies tend to stiffen with age and with inactivity, the baptismal movements of turning from sin and turning toward Jesus are what keep people flexible, limber, and healthy. This exercise of faith is what increases resiliency, and builds capacity for righteousness.

³⁶ *The New Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Greek Dictionary of the New Testament* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1990), 52.

Acts of the Apostles: Signs of the Kingdom

Continuing where John the Baptist ended, and in direct obedience to Jesus' commission, the apostles regularly called people to be baptized as the primary sign of their new life in Christ. Predictably, the two dominant forms of the word ("Baptism" and "Baptized") occur twenty-six times in Acts, more than any other book.

Beginning with Pentecost, once the wind and the fire and the chorus of many languages had quieted down, the apostles were faced with the ultimate existential question posed by the crowd that day: "What should we do?" From that decisive moment, the early church issued a consistent apostolic invitation to "be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ" (2:38). Subsequently, from Simon and the Samaritans (8:12-13), to the Ethiopian eunuch (8:37), to Saul in Damascus (9:18), to Cornelius and company (10:48), to Lydia and her household (16:15), to the jailer and his household (16:33), to Crispus and his household (18:8) people, in the various conditions of their lives, responded to the Good News and their reception of the Holy Spirit by the simple act of baptism. More than anything else, this was the sign that marked them as God's new creation, and set them on the path to a new way of life.

Peter: Sign of Salvation

Finally, both epistles attributed to Peter pick up on the signage of baptism. Comparing the salvific act of Christ to Noah's ark and the eight people who were saved through the water Peter writes, "And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you – not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ..." (1 Pt 3:21). Further alluding to both the

creative and the destructive forces inherent in water, the apostle points again to the power of baptism when he writes “...that by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water and by means of water, through which the world of that time was deluged with water and perished” (2 Pet 3:5-6). In other words, just as Noah and his crew were saved *from* the water *by* the water, the baptized experience similar double-sided effects through regeneration: becoming increasingly dead to sin, and becoming ever more alive to Christ.

Just as the start of the Bible begins on a wet word, so does its finale. “Let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift” (Rev 22:17). However, it is not just the word itself, but the very sound of it that is wet. The voice of Jesus himself gargles the Good News: “...his voice was like the sound of many waters,”³⁷ making the methodology resonate with the meaning. There is moisture in the message, quenching the soul of thirsty Adam.

From Genesis to Revelation, from our beginnings to our endings, God is making all things new through the agency of water. This, the most prevalent resource on the planet, covering approximately seventy percent of the globe, is the sign by which God is reconstituting souls, re-hydrating lives for abundance. The biblical texts, in both explicit and tacit ways, witness to how baptism, as a promesign of the suffusion of grace, is operative for disciples of Christ in the ongoing story of salvation.

As if to condense the whole of scripture in this regard, the writer to the Hebrews, calling his readers to a life of steady discipleship, encourages us to “approach (God) with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our *hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water*” (Heb 10:22). This rather holistic

³⁷ cf. Rev 1:15, 14:2, and 19:6.

allusion to baptismal identity summarizes the dynamic aspects of remaining wet in the living waters, while inhabiting a dry land, by both embracing and enacting the promise of the new covenant. Said yet another way, (re)turning is the movement of discipleship: turning from, and turning toward. The turning points are Sin and Savior, respectively. This is the metanoic “edge” of the baptismal coin. Honoring one’s baptism by following those sacramental signs takes a lifetime of practice in the holy progression from beginning to becoming. The early church, rife with examples of how this was done, is the historical environment to which we now turn our attention.

IV. Sacramental Semiotics: Sacred Signs

*Here a people of godly race are born for heaven;
the Spirit gives them life in the fertile waters.
The Church-Mother, in these waves, bears her children
like virginal fruit she has conceived by the Holy Spirit.*

*Hope for the kingdom of heaven, you who are reborn in this spring,
for those who are born but once have no share in the life of blessedness.
Here is to be found the source of life, which washes the whole universe,
Which gushed from the wound of Christ.*

*Sinner, plunge into the sacred fountain to wash away your sin.
The water receives the old man, and in his place makes the new man to rise.
You wish to become innocent; cleanse yourself in this bath,
whatever your burden may be, Adam's sin or your own.*

*There is no difference between those who are reborn; they are one,
in a single baptism, a single Spirit, a single faith.
Let none be afraid of the number of the weight of their sins:
those who are born of this stream will be made holy.*

~ Lateran basilica, known as the *Inscription of Sixtus III* (432-440),
Taken from the epigraph in *The Rites of Christian Initiation*

Like many Protestants, my theological training drew heavily from the Reformed tradition, an inheritance for which I remain deeply grateful. Reformed theology, however, is a product of its environment, and because the Reformation was largely a reaction to both errors and abuses in Medieval theology and practice, I have been interested in reaching further back, getting reacquainted with some of the early church fathers in order to recover a foundational understanding of the meaning and practice of baptism in the early church, and as a way of correcting for sacramental *drift*. This is not to say that the patristic era necessarily contained the best sacramental theology. Ancient world-views resulted in biblical perspectives that were often less than accurate, and there are some assumptions that, therefore, need to be modified, if not entirely culled. Nonetheless, many of the reflections which endure from that period of church history¹ contain profound theological insights that can be redacted for a post-modern audience. Similar to the way another author put it, my goal is to recover the “lost and neglected materials from the tradition, and thus to reanimate doctrinal reflection both imaginatively and spiritually.”² The church fathers had superb semiotic imaginations, making intertextual connections that span the canon of scripture.

This chapter, therefore, will explore some of the ways the early church understood the sacrament of baptism, and how the church of today can “rekindle [this] gift of God” (2 Tm 1:6) for the edification of the Body of Christ. Because of the non-transactional nature of baptism, the language of ‘stewardship’ will be interspersed as a reminder of

¹ While there is no widespread agreement among scholars, for the purposes of this study I take the patristic period to refer generally to that time in Christian history from the end of the apostolic age to the Council of Nicea (451). I do, however, include some of the later writers – like Gregory the Great, for example – whose orthodox influence extended into the early seventh century in the same spirit as the fathers.

² Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), back cover.

what is gratefully received, and carefully lived by trustees of this gift of grace. Moreover, the relationship between beginning and becoming will be further developed through a variety of patristic lenses.

As the timeless and enduring sign of a person's constantly new and continually renewing identity in Christ, baptism is the dominant sacramental symbol of a covenant life with God. It is about both beginning and becoming, both preserving and persevering, and as such spans the continuum of a lifetime. As an evangelist, I have come to appreciate the way baptism signals a decision to follow Jesus, and initially marks a person's entrance into the Kingdom. As a parish pastor, I am growing in my appreciation for the ways baptismal identity gives individuals a rubric for discipleship, and additionally provides a theological ethos for congregational formation. We will proceed around these fraternal twin themes of beginning and becoming.

Often referred to as a rite of initiation, baptism is a beginning, or entry point into a life with Christ, joining us to his bride, the church. The biblical language of *covenant* signals this relational beginning. Just as a birth initiates a life, and a wedding initiates a marriage, baptism marks a believer's initiation into a life of discipleship. As with other covenants, it is a rite of passage that is not finished until a person exhales their last breath. Death marks the moment when a life ends, when a marriage is over, when a baptism is completed.

Consider how the final words of Jesus on the cross, "It is finished" (Jn 19:30), declared the conclusion of the initial words spoken about him from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). These Father-Son pronouncements represent the bookends of a life of discipleship. At the beginning are the

words of the heavenly Father on the occasion of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, and thus the inauguration of his public ministry. At the end are the words of the earthly Jesus at the time of his crucifixion signaling the completion of his baptism, and therefore the fulfillment of his life and work. The *it* in "it is finished," encompasses this definitive sense of completion of Christ's messianic assignment of launching the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, as well as the pleasure the Father has in having his Son now sitting at his right hand, mission accomplished.

The Greek verb *bapto* reflects the rich meaning associated with the sacrament of baptism. The basic sense of the word is "to plunge" or "to dip," leading naturally "to wet." In some cases the word referred to "plunging a weapon into a person" reflecting its lethal effects. And in other cases it meant "to dye" (as a result of the dipping action). Adding to the depth of its sacramental implications is the way Homer employs the word in *Odyssey* (9.392), writing, "[a]nd as when a smith dips [*bapte*] a great axe or adze in cold water to temper it."³ To "get wet," to "die," to "dye," and to be "tempered" are all powerful images of the life-altering changes effected in and through baptism. Playing with the images the word signifies, one could say that a baptized person is one who has been plunged in the waters, participates in Christ's death, is inked with an invisible and indelible tattoo, and is tempered with the resolve of demanding discipleship, including the possibility of martyrdom. All of which prepare and practice people to be citizens in, and heirs to the Kingdom of God.

³ Paraphrased from Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 38-39.

Augustine wrote of the ways that baptism “conferred an indelible character” much like a tattoo or a brand, marking a person for life as a child of God.⁴ This “permanent marker” of baptism provides the reassurance that one’s identity in Christ is eternally secure. Such assurance is what emboldens people to explore and risk, eschewing the fears that might otherwise be debilitating for the demands of discipleship.

The way the early church fathers spoke of this rite of initiation into the Kingdom, through the church, was varied and creative as they experimented with metaphors to help mine the mysteries of baptism. Emphasizing the baptismal event as signaling the initial entry point into a life of faith, several of the church fathers (Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, and Clement, in particular) evoked images of Israel, both crossing the Red Sea with Moses, and crossing the Jordan River with Joshua as allegories for Christian baptism.⁵ Gregory’s work, in particular, is worth a closer look.

Clearly a product of the Alexandrian school, and influenced heavily by Philo, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-39) saw, in the life of Moses, a metaphor for growing in the spiritual life. Employing an allegorical method of biblical interpretation, Gregory saw many allusions to baptism in the life of Moses. For example, under the threat of death, the infant Moses was “placed in a basket daubed along its joints with slime and pitch...”⁶ a reference to the construction materials Noah used in preparation for the Deluge. He later makes the allusion much more explicit. Writing of the moment when the king’s daughter came upon the basket at the river’s edge, Gregory speaks of Moses being

⁴ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 800.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, ed. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 33. “Bitumen and pitch” is how the NRSV more accurately translates this phrase in Exodus 2:3.

discovered, “when he gave a childlike cry in the ark.” Thus, having been *rescued*, additional baptismal images follow, including *adoption* into a new household, a *non-consuming fire* and *divine voice* from the burning bush, and the commission to *release* his countrymen from Egyptian bondage through the parted *waters* of the Red Sea, gaining them entrance to the land of *promise*, eventually becoming their new *home*.⁷

What is significant and instructive is that the Moses story was continually told and re-told among the Israelites until it truly became *their* story, even after many generations had passed. The story of the Exodus, in other words, became a living story, reminding people of the ways that God acts in covenant-love (as opposed to convenient love) that often involves drastic measures in order to effect salvation. By introducing distinctively Christian terms in the retelling of this old story, Gregory was simply doing what our Jewish ancestors have always done, but re-signing the Exodus story through a distinctively baptismal lens. Thus appropriated, the images become rich and meaningful for people striving to be glad and grateful trustees of baptism.

The ‘watery passage’ provides a compelling metaphor for the ways a person takes that first, fateful step in crossing the threshold from earth to heaven, from sin to salvation, from death to life, from slavery to freedom. Just as the Israelites left Pharaoh behind in Egypt and followed Moses toward the land of Promise via the waters of the sea, so do the baptized abandon the old Adam, leaving behind a life of bondage to sin, as they follow the new Adam across the waters of the Jordan, into the promise of the Kingdom of God. It is a sacred, saving crossing; the threshold, in both cases, consisting, not of wood or of stone, but of water.

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, ed. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 33; italics mine.

In his *Mystagogical Catecheses*, Cyril, the fourth century bishop of Jerusalem, introduced sweeping, covenantal language which describes the baptismal turning point when one must renounce the devil in order to be initially grafted into Christ:

. . . when you renounce Satan, you trample underfoot your entire covenant with him, and abrogate your former treaty with Hell. The gates of God's Paradise are open to you, that garden which God planted in the east, and from which our first parent was expelled for his transgression. When you turned from west to east, the region of light, you symbolized this change of allegiance. Then you were told to say: *I believe in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and in one baptism of repentance.*⁸

The water of salvation, in other words, is both tomb and womb. Cyril further describes the baptismal beginning by first quoting and then inverting the wisdom of Solomon, saying, "There is a time to be born and a time to die, but the opposite is true in your case – there is a time to die and a time to be born. A single moment achieves both ends, and your begetting was simultaneous with your death. . . ."⁹

It could be said, then, that baptism signals a particular moment in a person's life when believers cross that threshold from death to life, from mortality into immortality, initiating them as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. That it is conceived of in covenantal language adds holy gravitas to its dramatic, life-altering implications.

However, *the baptismal event itself no more completes a person for a life of faith than does a wedding day complete a couple for marriage.* In both cases, it is the beginning point of a covenantal relationship which then gets practiced and worked out for the rest of one's life. For, as Tertullian famously said, "Christians are made, not born." Such a holy identity involves daily practices which, over a lifetime, form people for the

⁸ Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007), 123.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

royal priesthood (cf. 1 Pet 2:9). Baptismal identity, I suggest, is the foundational distinctive from which people are formed, providing a sacred *ego* or what might better be described as a *thego*¹⁰ out of which to live.

While baptism has typically been understood as a rite of initiation into the household of God, its richness lies in the new identity it conveys to people, providing new meaning, new purpose and new direction for their lives. In other words, baptism affords a dynamic identity for discipleship, providing a sacred cosmology out of which to live, by prompting the continual, daily choices of renunciation and affirmation: turning from sin, and turning toward Christ. These are the holy *noes* and *yeses* of our lives. However, for baptism to be a potent source for human telos it must be understood less as a one-time life event, and more as a *lifestyle*, one which is pursued and preserved through mindfulness, intention, and discipline.

In his magisterial book, Everett Ferguson, one of our preeminent patristics scholars, gives us access and insight into how the fathers championed a dynamic understanding of the sacrament. If catechesis is the instructional period designed to prepare a person for baptism, mystagogy is the practice of living it. Following are some of the more notable representative samples of how the fathers encouraged people to plunge the depths of their baptismal identity.

As early as the second century sermon of II Clement we see this emphasis of continually honoring the gift of baptism through lifestyle choices. “With what confidence

¹⁰ This is a portmanteau of my creation combining the Greek word *Theos* and the Latin word *Ego*, resulting in a “godly self,” or that process of becoming holy, conceptually similar to the Eastern Orthodox notion of *Theosis*. Additionally, Augustine, in one of his mystagogical sermons (Sermon 272), encouraged the newly baptized to “become who you are.” See Frank T. Griswald, “Toward a Baptismal Spirituality,” in *Drenched In Grace: Essays in Baptismal Ecclesiology Inspired by the Work and Ministry of Louis Weil*, eds. Lizette Larson-Miller and Walter Knowles (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 218.

shall we enter into the royal house of God if we do not *keep our baptism* pure and undefiled? Or who will be our advocate if we are not found to have holy and righteous works?”¹¹

Similarly, the third-century *The Questions of Bartholomew* (likely based on the original *Gospel of Bartholomew*) supposedly – but dubiously – quotes Jesus saying, “It is good if he who is baptized *preserves his baptism* without blame.”¹²

Again, the *Acts of Paul* contains this sense of preservationist language (although some scholars believe it was referring more specifically to maintaining celibacy), saying, “Blessed are they who have *kept their baptism secure*, for they shall rest with the Father and the Son.”¹³

In one of his more noteworthy sermons, Chromatius of Aquileia speaks of the need for the recipients of baptism – because it is given only once – to preserve it from sin. “Watch so that you do not return to your former sins and incur danger of death, because the grace of baptism is given only once.”¹⁴

Even Origen employs this sense of honoring the historic baptismal event with his use of past-tense language. In his *Homilies on Luke*, commenting about the need for a baptism by fire, he nonetheless references water baptism when he writes: “For, it is fitting

¹¹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 207; italics mine.

¹² *Ibid.*, 227; italics mine.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 229; italics mine.

¹⁴ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 660. This reference can be found in Sermon 14.4.

that one should be baptized first in ‘water and the Spirit.’ Then, when he comes to the fiery river, he can show that he *preserved the bathing* in water and the Spirit.”¹⁵

In all of these examples, the references contain what might be referred to as distinctively *maintenance* language, with an accompanying sense of preservation. From the perspective of stewardship then, it appears that these writers might be representative of a conservative approach, keeping and holding intact this sacred gift, much like the one-talent servant in a parable Jesus once told to contrast the ways that people can exercise the gifts they have been given and entrusted by God (cf. Mt 25:14-30). In other words, these are perspectives which emphasize *beginnings*, or the entry point to a covenantal life of faith. As important a beginning as baptism is, it is not enough. When it comes to *exercising* the gift of baptism, where are the entrepreneurial two and five talent servants? Who is showing us the way of *becoming*?

The Apologist Justin Martyr leads the way. Summarizing his view of baptism in his introduction to the Lord’s Supper, Justin plants one foot in past tense language to reflect an emphasis on the sacramental deed which was done, and then he places his other foot in the present, providing a bridge from the historical event to a present-day lifestyle, writing, “This food is called by us eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake except the one who believes the things taught by us to be true, *was washed* in the bath for forgiveness of sins and regeneration, and *who lives* in the manner Christ taught.”¹⁶

Interestingly, in commenting on this excerpt, Ferguson makes the helpful observation that

¹⁵ Ibid., 409; italics mine.

¹⁶ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 242; italics mine. The reference is to I Apol.66.1.

the object of faith being suggested by Justin is not in the life of Christ himself, but in Christian teachings.¹⁷

It is left mostly to Tertullian to introduce somewhat playful images that encourage people to *live* their baptisms. Much like the multi-talented servants who creatively put their gifts to use, Tertullian is a champion in the art of becoming immersed in the baptismal waters, to actively experience and to actually enjoy the abundance of the Kingdom on earth, as in heaven. It is significant that the first word in his exordium on the subject begins on the unmistakable note of joy: “Happy is our sacrament of water, in that, by washing away the sins of our early blindness, we are set free and admitted into eternal life!”¹⁸

So great is Tertullian’s delight in this gift that he continues by introducing additional playful images. Consider the following wonderful, pastoral encouragement: “But we, little fishes, after the example of our ICTHUS Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water....”¹⁹ The image, of course, encourages people to think of themselves as theologically amphibious such that those who become dry eventually die. We need to stay immersed and moist (a word Tertullian is fond of, along with “juicy”), swimming in the baptismal waters, staying in proximity to the fount of life in order to not only stay alive, but in order for our existence to be truly lively. Leonard Sweet recently pointed out on a social media site that

¹⁷ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 242.

¹⁸ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, trans. S. Thelwall (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Legacy Reprints, 2010), 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

“water was so pervasive an image in the early church that Tertullian called Christianity a ‘*religio aquae*.’”

By contrast, Tertullian speaks of the dangers lurking about in “arid” environments where snakes are known to live, tempting us, through a variety of seductions, to abandon the life-giving waters, leading us to death.²⁰ Through both exhortations and warnings, then, the invitation is to embrace an identity of ‘limpid living.’

Tertullian, a master at making semiotic connections between the two testaments of the Bible, is alluding, of course, to the craftiness of the serpent who tricked Adam into breaking faith with God (cf. Gn 3:1), as the same snake who shows up among the sons and daughters of Adam today, tempting us to stray from both the demands and the delights of the new covenant. Elsewhere, in his treatise *On Repentance*, he emphasizes this sense of holy vigilance when it comes to being trustees of baptism, since there are compelling forces that are competing for our souls, and he therefore issues, “a strong message about living above sin after baptism.”²¹

As another example of his semiotic skill, Tertullian elsewhere speaks of the Holy Spirit, who hovered over the waters of creation, as the same Spirit who “would continue to linger over the waters of the baptized.”²² Following his lead, one could metaphorically attribute a brooding nature to that same hovering Spirit, an image which is evocative of poultry. Laying hens, of course, can get broody, providing warmth to their incubating

²⁰ Tertullian, *On Baptism*, trans. S. Thelwall (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Legacy Reprints, 2010), 3.

²¹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 348.

²² Tertullian, *On Baptism*, trans. S. Thelwall (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Legacy Reprints, 2010), 7.

eggs, waiting for new life to crack open from beneath them. Normally curious and active, scratching for worms and chasing down bugs, brooding chickens are – trance-like – singularly focused, as if they have nothing else to do, nowhere to go. The image of the brooding Spirit, hovering over the chaotic waters of the inchoate creation, can be appropriated for how that same Holy Spirit, hovers over the baptismal waters of the new creation, and then can be found tenaciously brooding over the baptized, whose souls are incubating in the watery womb of new birth.

Not surprisingly, Tertullian wasn't the lone voice for lifestyle baptism rising above the otherwise large preserve of sacramental theology. The work of Origen of Alexandria provides yet another example of how the early church encouraged people to become what they were baptized to be. Commenting on the Letter of Paul to the Romans, Origen insists on the necessity of a vital, lively baptism, writing, "For you must not imagine that the renewing of the life, which is said to have been done once, suffices. On the contrary *at all times and daily*, this newness must, if it can be said, be renewed."²³ In fact, Origen consistently placed the weight of responsibility, "on the moral and spiritual life expected of the one who had been baptized."²⁴

Closely resembling this emphasis on the implications of baptism for morality, and as an agent of transformation toward a godly lifestyle, Gregory of Nyssa refers to the grace of God contained in the sacramental waters as propelling people "to grow into perfect maturity." Such growth is necessary since, "Baptism destroys sins but not the

²³ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 414; italics mine.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 428.

inclination to them.”²⁵ Likewise, in the *Shepherd*, Hermas addresses the expectation that stewards of the gift of baptism, having “...received the forgiveness of sins ought no longer to continue in sin but to live in purity.”²⁶

Keenly aware of the moral requirements assumed in the baptized, Augustine argued for the catechesis of baptismal candidates to include not only what to believe, but how to live.²⁷ Augustine understood baptism as the beginning point from which all other virtues of discipleship – or *becoming* Christian – flowed, especially prayer, which daily renews one’s baptismal identity and rejuvenates one’s baptismal practices.²⁸ Similarly, Chrysostom, in his *Baptismal Instructions*, in referring to the baptized, writes, “they not only are cleansed but *become* holy, too, and just.”²⁹ One of Chrysostom’s favorite baptismal images was that of marriage. Addressing the catechumens in his care he was fond of telling them, “Behold, . . . the days of your spiritual marriage are close at hand.”³⁰

A much lesser-known description of baptism as it informs and affects one’s lifestyle is located in Homily 27 of Proclus, bishop of Constantinople (434-446) in which he addresses his catechumens, reminding them of their new identity in Christ, and therefore how they must henceforth live. Referring to their baptismal vows he urged them, saying, “This you called out in words. Demonstrate it with your deeds! Sanction

²⁵ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 616.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 216.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 782.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 783.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 549; italics mine.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 548.

your confession with your conduct. . . . Do not return to the place whence you ran away.”
And, the devil is the “enemy from whom you have fled.”³¹

In an earlier sermon (Homily 16), Proclus makes an even more explicit reference to the kind of person baptism leads us to grow into, inspiring his listeners to:

Become immortal in virtue.
Become a genuine son with a view to righteousness.
Become a perpetual king.
Become an undefiled bridegroom.
Be radiant without stain.³²

That distinctively ‘becoming’ language provides hope, along with the reminder that baptism continually moves a person closer to Christ, forming them more fully like Christ, “from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18).

Taken as a whole then, it is evident that the Fathers recognized that one of the gifts of baptism was to provide people with a way to imagine themselves living on the *wet edge*³³ of their baptismal identity, participating in their new life in Christ, and cooperating with the Spirit who is sanctifying them to be more like Christ. Whatever the images one chooses to use, they are most appropriate when they favor movement or growth over *status quo*, or that progression from *beginners* to *becomers*. That movement, according to the patristic tradition, requires daily turning from sin and turning toward Jesus. This *metanoic* movement reflects the ongoing rhythms of baptism, represented by the continual invitation to turn, and it invites us to re-turn to the lethal, life-giving waters of the No and Yes of discipleship: the obliteration of the old self, as prerequisite for the

³¹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 749.

³² *Ibid.*, 752.

³³ The intended image here is one of keeping a wet edge when painting so that the finish is smooth, without ridges.

maturation of the new. We are always turning as we repeatedly return to the Font – the Fount of Life.

At one level then, baptism reflects the simplicity of wisdom contained in the primitive first century *The Didache* (“The Teaching”), which famously posits the two ways: “A Way of Life and a Way of Death, and the difference between the two Ways is great.”³⁴ The essence of this ancient teaching closely reflects both the wisdom literature of the Old Testament (Proverbs in particular), and New Testament exhortations (especially those found in the so-called Sermon on the Mount). To the ears of modern day Christians it can sound surprisingly basic in content, beginning with the commands to love God and to love others as the path that leads to life.

According to *The Didache*, the road to death, as one would expect, is characterized by evil, and includes a long laundry list of sins, most of which appear in the scriptures (such as adultery, fornication, greed, slander, etc.). This teaching issues a grave warning when it comes to neglecting the poor. For example, the way of death is represented by those people who are “without pity for the poor or feeling for the distressed. ...they turn away the needy and oppress the afflicted; they aid and abet the rich but arbitrarily condemn the poor; they are utterly and altogether sunk in iniquity. Flee, my children, from all this!”³⁵ The beauty of simplifying the complexities of life as a choice between two ways reflects the baptismal movements of turning from sin and turning toward Christ – the renunciations and the affirmations of a living faith.

³⁴ *The Apostolic Fathers: Early Christian Writings*, trans. Maxwell Staniforth (London: Penguin, 1987), 191.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

The stewardship of this sacred lifestyle, located in the richness of baptismal images, requires both the care and the exercise of the covenant, reflective of both beginning in the life of Christ, and becoming more like Christ. However, as followers of The Way have long known, spiritual challenges persist after baptism, sabotaging sanctification.

Recognizing the ongoing temptations to sin, as well as the reality of actually falling into sin, thereby dishonoring the covenant, the early church found language which was useful in restoring a person who had strayed from their baptismal moorings. Acknowledging the need for ongoing repentance subsequent to baptism, and ‘correcting for drift’ for those who have gotten off-course, several of the fathers introduced the notion of the “second plank.” Thomas Aquinas (1225-1247) gives credit to Jerome (c.347-420) for the term where he refers to penitence as “a plank for those who have had the misfortune to be shipwrecked.”³⁶

Notably, like so many things, the phrase “second plank” is originally attributable to Tertullian, who rather poetically describes the grace of having our baptismal identity restored through the act of repentance. In chapter IV of *De Paenitentia* he writes,

To all sins, then, committed whether by flesh or spirit, whether by deed or will, the same *God* who has destined penalty by means of judgment, has withal engaged to grant pardon by means of repentance, saying to the people, "Repent thee, and I will save thee;" and again, "I live, saith the Lord, and I will (have) repentance rather than death." Repentance, then, is "life," since it is preferred to "death." That repentance, O sinner, like myself (nay, rather, less than myself, for pre-eminence in sins I acknowledge to be mine), do you so hasten to, so embrace, as a shipwrecked man the protection of some plank. This will draw you forth when sunk in the waves of sins, and will bear you forward into the port of the divine clemency. Seize the opportunity of unexpected felicity: that you, who sometime were in God's sight nothing but "a drop of a bucket," and "dust of the

³⁶ Thomas Aquinas, “Summa Theologica: Whether Penance is a Second Plank after Shipwreck?,” *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, accessed October 21, 2013. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/aquinas/summa.TP_Q84_A6.html.

threshing-floor," and "a potter's vessel," may thenceforward become that "tree" which is sown beside the waters, is perennial in leaves, bears fruit at its own time, and shall not see fire, nor "axe." Having found "the truth," repent of errors; repent of having loved what God loves not: even we ourselves do not permit our slave-lads not to hate the things which are offensive to us; for the principle of voluntary obedience consists in similarity of minds.³⁷

Problematically, even with so lavish a description of grace, Tertullian maintained a rigorist interpretation of the troubling text of Hebrews 6:4-6³⁸, and insisted that there can be no reconciliation for a person having committed a post-baptismal sin. Attempting to reconcile these apparently conflicting positions, F.F. Bruce posits that

Tertullian had one particular kind of sin in mind, and one which actually does not enter into our author's argument here: according to Tertullian, the writer of this warning passage (identified by him with Barnabas), "who learnt this *from* apostles, and taught it *with* apostles, never knew of any second repentance promised by apostles to the adulterer and fornicator."³⁹

Additionally, it may well be that Tertullian, out of his insistence that baptism is a sacred gift, wanted to emphasize the importance of honoring it through lifestyles of holiness. Even so, his notion of the second plank, as a sort of makeshift lifeboat in the stormy sea of sin in which a person has been shipwrecked, remains a compelling image of rescue and forgiveness. While "walking the plank" is now more commonly associated with death by drowning, Tertullian's image of the second plank suggests how repentance is the life preserver that restores sinners to the grace of God's unending mercy. The wet sacrament,

³⁷ Tertullian, "The Tertullian Project: A collection of material ancient and modern about the ancient Christian Latin writer Tertullian and his writings," accessed October 21, 2013. http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf03/footnote/fn113.htm#P11305_3204867.

³⁸ "For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt" (Heb 6:4-6). Similar passages in this letter that raise questions about the doctrine of eternal security are found in 10:26-31 and 12:17.

³⁹ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle To The Hebrews. The New International Commentary On The New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1984), 123.

of course, captures beautifully both sides of the baptismal coin: the necessity for the old self to be destroyed in order for a new life in Christ to be established.

Echoing and summarizing this spirit of the fathers is Martin Luther's reflection on the nature of one's life in Christ with its vague allusion to baptism:

This life, therefore, is not godliness
but the process of becoming godly,
not health, but getting well,
not being but becoming, not rest but exercise.
We are not now what we shall be,
but we are on the way.
The process is not yet finished,
but it is actively going on.
This is not the goal but it is the right road.
At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle,
but everything is being cleansed.⁴⁰

As we saw in chapter two, capitulation to the (North American) culture has muddied the waters for holy living. What is needed is a way to recover a sacred identity that has been sullied by the values of consumption and production. One way to do that is to return to Father Irenaeus, with his concept of recapitulation. Generally speaking, the notion of recapitulation is a concept of the atonement whereby the disobedience of Adam is reversed through the obedience of Jesus as the 'second Adam,' and restores humanity's relationship with God to its prelapsarian condition. The damage done under a Garden tree was undone on the Calvary tree. The continual movements of the baptized to repent of their sin and return to Christ is the life-long liturgy for Becomers.

Although considered to be macabre by many, the images enshrined beneath the Church of *Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini* in Rome are a startling reminder of every person's eventual fate. There, in the famous Capuchin Crypt, is an

⁴⁰ "Defense and Explanation of All the Articles," *Luther's Works*, vol. 32, *Career of the Reformer II* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 24.

assortment of skeletal remains of thousands of monks. Some of the bones have been artfully arranged into patterns or made into chandeliers, while others are simply (and apparently irreverently) piled in a heap. Once a visitor gets past the initial shock of being surrounded by so many human remains, it is actually a helpful visual aid, a reminder of the fleeting nature of life, and a powerful motivator to spend their limited days intentionally and with purpose. Reinforcing this reminder are the haunting words inscribed at the far end of the crypt, here in translation from the original Latin:

"What you are now we used to be; what we are now you will be..."

As we have seen, the early church Christians, in both the East and the West, were exposed to potent images which helped to form their baptismal imaginations in a way that was more dynamic than passive, encouraging active participation in the process of sanctification. Notwithstanding the rigorous demands and expectations which were often imposed as prerequisites for receiving the sacrament, i.e., extensive catechesis, multiple exorcisms, and thorough examinations, the fathers employed images which yet encourage today's faithful to take the plunge, and to continue swimming in the baptismal waters, in the life-long decisions which turn us from death, and re-turn us to life. For when we well know both who we are, and to Whom we belong, we are well on our way to knowing how to well live.

Our baptismal beginning, in other words, results in the ripple effects of who we eventually grow to become for those who remain engaged in the struggle between sin and sanctification from beginning to end. For, as Gregory of Nyssa plainly said, "What you

have not become, you are not.”⁴¹ Or, as Cyprian of Carthage similarly but more positively suggested, the Christian life involves becoming what one has begun to be, writing, “We pray that we who were sanctified in baptism may be able to persevere in that which we have begun to be.”⁴²

⁴¹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 616.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 361.

V. Living Wet: Full Immersion in the Abundant Life

Our entire spiritual life is the activation of the seed planted in baptism.

~ St. Mark the Ascetic (6th century)

*Study the science of art. Study the art of science. Develop your senses.
Especially, learn how to see.
Realize that everything connects to everything else.*

~Leonardo Da Vinci

*The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes,
but in having new eyes.*

~Marcel Proust

*This you called out in words. Demonstrate it with your deeds!
Sanction your confession with your conduct. . . .
Do not return to the place when you ran away.*

~Proclus

The congregation I serve has given me the nickname “the child whisperer” because I tend to have a calming effect on children. This, however, is not some intrinsic gift with which I have been naturally endowed. Rather, at the baptisms of infants there are a number of things I do to make it a smooth experience, worthy of a baby album photo. I always spend some time with the children before their baptismal day so that they become acquainted with my voice, comfortable with my presence, and even practice the ‘hand off’ from the parent to me ahead of time so as to avoid any awkwardness that might incite anxiety in the child. On the morning of the christening day, the font is filled with warm water to reduce the shock, making the experience feel more like a bath.

Fortunately – as it turns out – none of that worked at a recent baptism in our church, and immediately after her baptism, “Evie” started crying, and then proceeded to escalate uncontrollably, even after returning her to her mother. “So much for my reputation,” I thought to myself. Afterwards, a colleague who was visiting, and who had observed the event, shared with me his recent experience of witnessing a baptism in a Russian Orthodox service where he watched the priest immerse a naked infant three times in a font of cold water. Predictably, the child, after the brief pause of breathless surprise, screamed some of the paint off the ceiling. When speaking to the grandmother of the child after worship, asking if there wasn’t a more hospitable way to administer the welcoming sacrament, my friend was startled to hear her say, through her thick Russian accent, “Oh no, if the baby did not cry the priest would pinch him until he did! When babies are first born the best sound to hear is the cry; it means that they are breathing, alive, healthy. Baptism is a birthing!”

My experience with Evie, coupled with the story of the Russian Orthodox baptism, has caused me to re-think the images of my role as a baptizer, now making me want to exchange the nick-name “child-whisperer” for “mid-wife,” awakening, even *startling* people to re-birth into a new world and a new life. The Lutheran song writer, John Ylvisaker, captured this essence beautifully in his song “Borning Cry.”

I was there to hear your borning cry,
 I'll be there when you are old.
 I rejoiced the day you were baptized,
 to see your life unfold.
 I was there when you were but a child,
 with a faith to suit you well;
 In a blaze of light you wandered off
 to find where demons dwell.

When you heard the wonder of the Word
 I was there to cheer you on;
 You were raised to praise the living Lord,
 to whom you now belong.
 If you find someone to share your time
 and you join your hearts as one,
 I'll be there to make your verses rhyme
 from dusk 'till rising sun.

In the middle ages of your life,
 not too old, no longer young,
 I'll be there to guide you through the night,
 complete what I've begun.
 When the evening gently closes in,
 and you shut your weary eyes,
 I'll be there as I have always been
 with just one more surprise.

I was there to hear your borning cry,
 I'll be there when you are old.
 I rejoiced the day you were baptized,
 to see your life unfold.¹

¹ John Ylvisaker, *Borning Cry* (Waverly, IA: New Generation Publishers, 1985).

The fertility of the birthing image is worth further elaboration as a metaphor for being “born from above” (Jn 3:3).

After first describing two opposing and extreme styles of leadership – autocratic and laissez faire (highly controlling in the former case, easy-going and permissive in the latter) – a recent handbook to the catechumenate has suggested that a third, or middle, way may be more appropriate when it comes to faith formation and the development of disciples. Consider the maieutic way:

The midwife does not herself give birth, but makes birth easier by providing support, comfort, ideas, direction, encouragement, and strength when needed. ... To participate in the maieutic process ... is to serve as a midwife, that is, to assist in a birthing process of bringing into the light a new creation.... The midwife assists the creator to expel from the womb that which has been nurtured, nourished, and warmed into viability. The midwife implants nothing from without and brings only her skill and strength to coach the natural process, albeit a process fraught with danger, labor, and pain.²

I find the notion of the role of “assistant to the creator” to be a compelling description of what ministers do in companioning people through their lives, being alert to signs of redemption (while not being deterred by the presence and necessity of pain), continually asking the question, ‘to what new life might this person be giving birth?’ Like a lot of things in the modern age the church has softened some of the startling effects of baptism. Such things as christening gowns, warm water, and climate-controlled sanctuaries may end up having the unintended consequence of creating associations of comfort and pleasure, whereas the administration and lifestyle of baptism should provoke

² Dennis Bushkofsky, Suzanne Burke, and Richard Rouse, eds. *Go Make Disciples: An Invitation to Baptismal Living* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2012), 63.

images of profound struggle.³ Like birthing, the transition to a new life in Christ is fraught with discomfort, even pain. In fact, there may be no other event where life and death are in such close proximity to one another than during a birthing. Eliminating shock entirely during the administration of baptism may, paradoxically, result in the development of disciples who become *shocked* when their lives are interrupted by pain, or when facing death.⁴ Baptism provides necessary *shock value* to disciples by initiating them into a life in Christ, a life full of re-birthing surprises, both pleasant and painful.

Churches that are interested in reaching out to new people may be prone to methodologies that do not reflect the rigors of *costly discipleship*.⁵ Beginnings are important inasmuch as they set a trajectory for a lifetime. If the beginning is wrong, the end will be wrong as well, along with much that lies in between. I suggest that much of the present-day malaise in the church of North America is largely the result of adapting methods of evangelism that are more suitable as propaganda techniques for the enterprise of capitalism than for calling people to a holy life as citizens of the Kingdom of God. Failure to help people take their first, crucial steps on the road of costly discipleship amounts to a misrepresentation of the Gospel, and is a disservice to people who desire to live meaningfully in a broken world. While I applaud many of the emerging church

³ In a “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” culture, *struggle*, in its many manifestations, may be viewed as an unwelcome intruder, and the very enemy of a meaningful life. Offering a correcting perspective to this false assumption, the Dutch Reformed theologian, Berkhof, makes a convincing argument to demonstrate how struggle is normative and necessary for progress in the Christian life, as necessitated by the death of the ‘old man’ to make room for the emergence of the ‘new man.’ See Hendrikous Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith*, trans. Sierd Woudstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1979), 512-515.

⁴ The “rebirth” (Gk: *palingenesias*) through baptismal waters of which Paul writes to Titus (3:5) is best understood as a life-long process of becoming a new creation, as opposed to a one-time event devoid of progress.

⁵ Bonhoeffer, who coined the term, also wrote that, “when God bids a man he bids him come and die.” See Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 89.

efforts that are creatively reaching out to the un-baptized, they may inadvertently create some unexpected results by not more accurately reflecting the *crucible* nature of a life in Christ.

The current cultural (some might even argue *ecclesiastical*) ethos in which we live suffers from a lack of sacramental imagination. Unlike the Ethiopian eunuch, who, upon, recognizing Jesus as the Messiah and seeing some water, asked, “Here’s water. Why can’t I be baptized?” (Acts 8:37 MSG), most people today do not make such automatic associations. Relatively speaking, the church does well at extending invitations to “come to the table,” but it needs to be more intentional about the summons to “come to the water.” The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how baptismal theology can be integrated with the practice of baptismal lifestyles, largely through sharing the personal stories of individuals and faith communities who are seeking to intentionally embrace lifestyles of ‘living wet.’

Is there a way, I want to ask, to return to the baptismal waters, and discover there, not a scum-covered pond littered with liturgical flotsam, but a stream in which flows living water (Jn 4:10-11), and the very fountain of life (Ps 36:9)?⁶ Moreover, how does one bridge the integrative gap between sacramental theology and sacred living? How do people *live* their baptism?

The North American Association of the Catechumenate (NAAC) is pointing the way. Founded in 1995, its mission is to “promote and nurture the catechumenal process

⁶ Elsewhere, the image is similarly used in the context of prophetic accusation to describe the nature of God during a time when the people of Israel “...have forsaken me, *the fountain of living water*, and dug cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water” (Jer 2:13; italics mine). Jeremiah’s condemnation is a result of the people exchanging an eternal source of life, for inferior ones.

in order that the whole faith community might fulfill Christ's commission to make disciples, baptizing and teaching all peoples."⁷ Even more compelling is its vision which has, among other things,

...the goal of helping change congregational culture so that faith communities can become lively, faithful minorities in a post-Christian, post-modern culture and serve as transformational communities of disciples for the sake of God's mission in the world."⁸

Intrigued by the concept (which is really a recovery of ancient church practices) I attended the 2014 gathering held in Vancouver, B.C.⁹

The primary pedagogy for introducing us to the catechumenate was to actually practice it. Over a period of three days we worshipped by following the cycles of the liturgical year, each worship experience designed to represent a step in the baptismal journey. We began with a Rite of Welcome in which various participants at the conference role-played people who were in the early stages of inquiring into faith. Each was assigned a sponsor who was to continue with them through the process.

Next, in a service reflecting the liturgy of the First Sunday in Lent, the Rite of Enrollment was observed, signaling the start of a formal process of catechesis. In the practice of a local congregation, the enrollment would be followed by a period of instruction and exploration around the basics of the faith, in preparation for baptism.

⁷ <http://catechumenate.org/index.php?page=about-us>. Accessed November 5, 2015.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ The day, months previously, that I first stumbled upon this group while doing research I came home and declared to my wife, "I've found my people!" To be with them for three days was akin to a trekkie being at a Star Trek convention. Not only were they smitten by the power of baptism to shape and renew and re-direct lives for the Kingdom of God, but many of them were walking encyclopedias of trivia and baptismal information from different periods of church history. I was relieved and pleased to discover other "baptismal nerds" in North America.

The third service was an Easter Vigil which included an elaborate candlelight liturgy, culminating in the celebration (or, in this case, *reaffirmation*) of baptisms, and followed by receiving the Eucharist. Afterwards, a reception added to the celebrative atmosphere, providing an occasion to welcome the newly-baptized.

Interspersed between worship services during those three days were seminars that reflected the actual catechumenate process, providing demonstrations of how it can be taught. For example, Paul Palumbo, a pastor in the ELCA tribe, described how he educates catechumens about the liturgy so that they can be more meaningfully formed by it. “Imagine a situation in which you feel completely overwhelmed and out of control,” he said, “something you are entirely incapable of managing or resolving. It might be an addiction, a difficult relationship, a health issue. Whatever it is there is no remedy in sight, leaving you feeling altogether helpless.” He then suggested that, in the face of such formidable circumstances, there is only one appropriate response, and it is one which is integrated into the weekly liturgy during the prayers of confession, as the congregation sings, *Kyrie Eleison*: Lord, have mercy. When life implodes, when there are no other resources available, these are the words that give voice to hopelessness. Because of the One to whom they are addressed, the One whose “mercies never come to an end” (Lam 3:22), hope endures. More than merely seeking forgiveness for sins, this is the cry for help when life becomes un-navigable, when the best that a shipwrecked person can do is to throw herself on the mercy of God. By practicing this liturgy every Sunday, worshippers gradually become fluent in the language of prayer for the other days of the week. *Kyrie Eleison*.

The final worship service reflected the celebration of Pentecost, fifty days after Easter. The catechumenate refers to this as the “Affirmation of Vocation.” I was asked that morning to be among the four participants to assume the part of someone who had been baptized during the Easter Vigil. What I first thought was merely role-playing, ended up impacting me profoundly.

Having had ‘fifty days’ to reflect on it, we were invited to make a simple statement about how our baptismal identity was to be expressed vocationally. We gathered at the font, and after singing a song, reading some liturgy, and splashing some water, we shared our statements. Without having given it much thought beforehand, when it was my turn I said, “My name is Eric Peterson. I affirm my gift as a writer, and I offer my words to the glory of God.” After each of our affirmations the assembly sang this response:

*Blessed be God, who chose you in Christ.
Live in love as Christ loved us.*

The service concluded, we said our good-byes, and I got in my car to drive home. However, about an hour later, just as I was crossing the international border back into Washington State, I looked in the rearview mirror, with this realization: “I think something may have happened to me back there.” As a result, I spent the rest of the seven-hour trip absorbing an identity I had previously resisted, praying for the Holy Spirit to prompt me with what to write.

Baptismal imagination is the awareness that “something happened to me back there.” The historical event of baptism spills into our present and overflows into our future, transporting us on the sacred stream of meaning and purpose. Spirit-led, it

involves first hearing the invitation that emerges from the depths, and then heeding the summons to be deepened, as “(d)eep calls to deep” (Ps 42:7).

However, one of the challenges of baptism is that, as a signifier, it does not remain visible, as do most other signs. Once a person has been baptized, there is no ongoing evidence of having been so claimed and identified – no uniform, no badge, no title. At least with the Abrahamic Covenant there was the indelible nature of circumcision, but even that was not readily visible to more than the most intimate of acquaintances. If baptism were accompanied by something more durable – like getting a tattoo, or a unique haircut, or a piece of jewelry – it might create a less precarious reminder of one’s identity. We aren’t given that. Quickly after getting splashed in the Three-fold Name we dry off, the words wisp away, the memory and the meaning of the event then entrusted to absentminded people, putting baptism in jeopardy of being overlooked, misunderstood, or even altogether forgotten.

This, I believe, is the crisis of our age. We have forgotten who we are, because we have forgotten *Whose* we are. We need to rekindle memory. We need to be reminded. We need our baptismal identity to be remembered in order to live out of it, and in order to live into it. Sponge-like, our lives need to be sacramentally sopped, absorbing the means of grace which rehydrate arid souls.

Water is essential for life in its beginnings, in its renewings, and in its endurings. Its beginnings, in which our embryonic formation and development occurs, take place in the dark waters of the womb. Frederick Buechner, in his inimitable style, reflects on the significance of water:

For nine months we breathe in it. The sight of water in oceans, rivers, and lakes is soothing to the spirit as almost nothing else. To swim in it is to become as

weightless and untrammelled as in dreams. The wake of a ship, the falling of a cataract, and the tumbling of a brook can hold us spellbound for hours, and in times of drought we feel as parched in our being as the lawn that crackles beneath our feet.

Air is our element, but water is our heart's delight. "My flesh faints for thee," the Psalmist sings, "as in a dry and weary land where no water is" (63:1). And among the last things that Jesus ever said, and among the most human, were the words, "I thirst" (John 19:28).¹⁰

Journeying by stages – from beginning, to becoming, to ending – water is the foundation of life, a delight to the heart. To be removed from it for any length of time is perilous to one's health. Thus, the need for sacramental memory.

Baptismal Reminders

I have sometimes felt that one of the things that I am trying to do in my own ministry context is to conduct a series of experiments to see if the Word Made *Flesh* can also be the Word Made *Wet*. It has been my desire to extend and expand baptismal images far beyond the one-time sacrament itself to ones that create a more comprehensive, pervasive sacramental awareness. Get caught in the rain: remember your baptism. Drink a glass of water: remember you are the baptized. Sit in your hot tub: remember. But do more than remember. Such recollection leads to substantive lifestyle choices that involve both the hard work of love, and the unpleasant business of dying to self.

While I love words and believe in their power to transform, I am convinced that they are not, by design, adequate on their own for the life-changing work of salvation and liberation. Yet when they are accompanied by a tangible experience, engaging the senses, captivating the imagination, they can be truly transformative. This, of course, is the

¹⁰ Originally published in *Beyond Words*, accessed January 4, 2016. www.frederickbuechner.com/content/water.

wisdom of not uncoupling the important, synergistic partnership of Word and Sacrament, or words and things.

To do this I have conducted playful experiments with water in worship, using the font as a focal point. On a recent Sunday, after leading the prayer of confession from the pulpit, I then moved to the baptismal font and raised high a large pitcher of water. As the water was slowly poured into the bowl, splashing delightfully, catching sunlight, I posed the questions asked of anyone about to be baptized, and gave time for a verbal response after each one:

- *Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? (I do.)*
- *Do you turn to Jesus Christ, and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? (I do.)*
- *Will you be Christ's faithful disciple, obeying his Word and showing his love? (I will, with God's help.)*¹¹

With the pitcher empty and the font full (indicative of a great and “wonderful exchange” having occurred¹²) I then declared: “You have been washed clean, and renewed in the waters of baptism, adopted forever as the beloved daughters and sons of God. This is the enduring power of divine love. In the name of Jesus Christ, your sins are completely and irrevocably forgiven. Be at peace. Amen.”

It brings to mind a wet poem by Philip Larkin:

¹¹ *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 407.

¹² This is the phrase John Calvin used to describe how Christ absolves us by taking upon himself our sins, writing, “This is the wonderful exchange which, out of his measureless benevolence, he has made with us; that, becoming Son of man with us, he has made us sons of God with him; that, by his descent to earth, he has prepared an ascent to heaven for us; that, by taking on our mortality, he has conferred his immortality upon us; that, accepting our weakness, he has strengthened us by his power; that, receiving our poverty unto himself, he has transferred his wealth to us; that, taking the weight of our iniquity upon himself ... he has clothed us with his righteousness.” Although he wrote this in the context of his reflections on the Lord’s Supper, it is appropriate for an understanding of baptism as well. See John T. McNeill, ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1362.

Water

*If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.*

*Going to church
Would entail a fording
To dry, different clothes;*

*My liturgy would employ
Images of sousing,
A furious devout drench,*

*And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.¹³*

One day we may continue this series of sacramental experiments by borrowing an idea attributed to Marva Dawn. At the beginning of worship (immediately following the prelude when the room is silent) someone will walk in carrying a large pitcher of water, empty it slowly and deliberately into the baptismal font and say, “The waters of our identity.” A second person will then walk in bringing a chalice and paten, set them on the communion table, and announce, “The feast of our future.” A third person will walk in with a Bible, place and open it on the pulpit and proclaim, “The book of our story.” Finally, I will walk in, and with open arms and a warm smile say, “People of God, welcome home!”¹⁴

¹³ Philip Larkin, *The Whitsun Weddings* (London: Faber & Faber Ltd., 1964), 20.

¹⁴ Joan Huyser-Honig, “Remembering Baptism: Living Wet,” Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, September 30, 2009, accessed March 24, 2015. <http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/remembering-baptism-living-wet/>.

Since I hail from a tradition that does not re-baptize, we have looked for such ways to help people remember their baptisms and to renew the baptismal covenant through the reaffirmation of vows. A version of Wesley's Covenant Renewal Service is typically celebrated annually on *Baptism of the Lord Sunday*, soon after the New Year. Our adaptation of it over the years has variously included such things as inviting people forward to select a smooth stone from the brimming font, or tracing the sign of the cross on their foreheads with water from the font. No fewer than three times in every worship service there is an allusion to baptism that has been integrated into the liturgy. The first occurrence is in the singing of the doxology ("Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost"). The second one signals the end of a sermon ("In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen."). And the last one happens at the benediction: following the Aaronic blessing (Nm 6:24-26), while making the sign of the cross over the congregation, I say, "in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit." Each instance, with its echoes of the baptismal formula, is intended to reinforce sacramental identity and imagination.

As a final example, when we celebrate funerals, the closing words of the service are spoken from the font. While water is being splashed and sprinkled on people in the first few rows, the celebrant will say, "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, I declare to you that *Name* has now completed *his/her* baptism." This liturgical act bookends a person's life, from beginning to end, in sacramental language, and encourages the survivors to live the remainder of their days in such a way as to end their lives well, until baptism-complete.

After being exposed to such language and images for nearly two decades I was curious to find out if members of my own congregation had found it to be a helpful rubric for discipleship formation. Following is a representative sampling of those findings.

A staff member described the way baptism helps to even out the hierarchies of power, education, income and age. Noting that we are a highly educated congregation located in a university town, he commented on our decision to remove all titles from people's names, not only omitting "Dr." and "Rev.," but even "Mr. and Mrs.," so as not to set people apart by occupation, education or marital status. The idea is that the titles and roles that create prestige in our culture are meaningless in the Kingdom, where the first shall be last. The personal names uttered over the waters in baptism are sufficient, identifying each of us as members in the one family of God where there are no favorite children. This "leveling effect" of baptism has helped us to more effectively minister as a priesthood of all believers.

Another staff member spoke of the way baptism has become a hermeneutic for life, affecting the way she reads scripture, and informing the way she pursues her vocation. Yet another person expressed appreciation for the way baptism connects us to a covenant way of life, especially in marriage. Lastly, one of the pleasant surprises that came out of this meeting was hearing a new staff member (just three months on the payroll) articulate baptism as something that is "practiced," as a way of life. It is, she said, "a current, daily part of our lives, rather than a one-time event at the beginning of our journey." That she picked this up in the context of worship in a relatively short period of time was gratifying. Not everyone, however, has been so quick to recognize its value.

I became aware of a man in our fellowship who, while being deeply pious and committed to Christ, has never felt the need to either be baptized or to join our church, although he has been a faithful participant since its inception. I was interested in understanding why that was the case, but also what it is like for him to be in an environment where baptism is a recurrent theme. “Jackson” was raised in a Nazarene Church, and understands baptism as an individual’s expression before the community reflecting an inner, personal commitment to follow Christ. He views it, therefore, more as a public testimony, witnessing to the decision to live a life of discipleship. In his case, he had a profound conversion experience during his first year of college, but instead of being baptized, he gave his testimony to his congregation, and sees that as his rite of initiation into the Body of Christ. In his own words, “the act of getting wet is merely symbolic of an inner reality which can be effected in other ways, as through a public profession of faith.”

Still, he described Colbert’s emphasis on baptism in words such as “refreshing” and “intriguing,” and expressed his appreciation for the continual reminder when vows are being renewed. When asked how it is for him to hear the baptism specific language common in our setting he said that at first it sounded judgmental, and he wondered if people might think that he wasn’t saved. Over time, he learned to simply do some internal “translating,” so that when he hears “baptism” he thinks “conversion” or “discipleship.” And when asked why, even now, he chooses not to be baptized, he said that he still could, but doesn’t see the need for it, reiterating his sense that it is symbolic of a commitment to Christ, not a necessary act for discipleship. He went on to remind me

that “there was that man who was crucified next to Jesus who was saved and welcomed into Paradise without benefit of being baptized.” Point taken from the Penitent Thief.

It is gratifying to see additional evidence of how the community that comprises Colbert Presbyterian Church is integrating baptismal imagination in their own lives. For example, a recent email that came through our prayer chain said, “Thank you for your prayers for my Aunt Nancy during her long illness. She completed her baptism last night, surrounded by her family and a Great Cloud of Witnesses.” Even so brief a note as that provides the reminder that we are all going to die someday, and every day until that fateful day arrives is another opportunity to live out a baptismal identity. It is, additionally satisfying to hear the stories of people who have found baptism to be meaningful, helpful, even salvific.

A young man recently shared with me his experience of traveling in a foreign country, driven, he said, by his desire to “run away from home.” As it happened, what he was running from kept catching up to him, even thousands of miles away, because it was within him. After several weeks of fleeing he was exhausted, defeated, despondent. He had nowhere to go, no place to hide. He was at the end of his rope. In fact, he found himself staring at the end of a rope one day, contemplating putting an end to his life. He spent some time reflecting on how it had come to this, having arrived at a point where he no longer wanted to live. In the wake of his considerable regrets, death was looking like a merciful friend of deliverance from his pain. “And then,” he said to me, “just when it could not have gotten any darker, what I heard was as clear as my voice speaking to you right now: ‘You are baptized.’” That was all he heard, but it was all he needed. He cut the rope down, and boarded the next plane for home, whereupon he began the long, hard

work of reconciling his relationships. The rope he retained as a reminder that what nearly ended his life became a lifeline, rescuing him from the noose, and restoring him to the covenant of his baptismal identity and purpose.

I will never forget the story of a friend who failed hospice. At the age of fifty-seven, after her doctors gave her something short of six months to live, Sandy quit her job, and moved in with her daughter and grandchildren to finish out her days. To the bewilderment of her doctors she didn't die. She was healed. Without chemotherapy, radiation, surgery or even so much as an aspirin, she was, according to her testimony, "cured by the Great Physician." Since then, a friend of hers has sent a card on each of her birthdays to celebrate her new life. The cards commemorate not her actual age, but the years since being given a second chance at life. The last card she received celebrated her "eleventh" birthday.

Like a lot of people who have had similar experiences, Sandy sees her close encounter with death as a gift that has more fully ushered her into an abundant way of life, characterized, in my observation, by an indomitably joyful spirit. You will never hear her complain about the weather or about traffic or any of the other things that can cause people to grumble. She doesn't have time for such petty complaints; she is too busy being grateful, living her life fully whether in traffic jams by herself or at Mariners' games with her family. Significantly, her life is primarily focused on and defined by people. It is in relationships, she has found, that she experiences the greatest meaning and the deepest joy. This is the mysterious way of baptism: only by entering into solidarity with Jesus in his death is one able to fully experience the fullness of life he came to bring.

While conducting field research for this project I had the pleasure of meeting and interviewing a number of practitioners who are being intentional about integrating lively baptismal identity in their respective congregations. Through conversations with these leaders I posed questions around the *why* and *how* of discipleship formation using the sacrament of baptism as its primary pedagogical tool. I was eager to hear stories of how these leaders landed on baptism as a focal point for their ministries, how they have experienced baptism being an agent of transformation and renewal, and how they keep baptismal identity alive and fresh in their congregational contexts. Because of the relatively small percentage of pastors who are doing this, I was interested in understanding just why they consider a recovery of the catechumenate preferable to the plethora of leadership literature that is popular among so many colleagues.

Paul Palumbo, whom I met at the NAAC training conference mentioned earlier, has been using the catechumenal process to great benefit in his Lake Chelan congregation for the last sixteen years – long enough to judge its value. During that time 80% of the members have gone through the process. Additionally, he said that becoming a sponsor to a catechumen is a great way to keep their own baptism alive and fresh.

Paul's love of the catechumenate is apparent as he describes the process. Through a series of classes, he unpacks one aspect of the Sunday liturgy each week, and shows how it can be practiced outside of worship. The *Kyrie*, which he shared at the NAAC conference, is but one way that a piece of the Sunday liturgy, practiced week after week, can be integrated into one's life. One person told him of an experiment she tried which grew to become a holy habit. Whenever she has to stop for a traffic signal, its three lights

prompt her to say aloud that part of the Communion liturgy commonly known as the Paschal Mystery, namely,

Christ has died.
Christ has risen.
Christ will come again.

It reminds her, she says, that she has a share in the death, resurrection and return of Christ.

I had an especially delightful conversation with Linda Nepsted, pastor of the church my father founded in 1963 – the year I was born. When I returned to Christ Our King for its fiftieth anniversary celebration in 2013 (the first time I had been back since my ordination in 1990) there was much about the weekend that was meaningful. At the evening gala I was asked to reflect on my experience of having grown up in this church, and the formative environment that it was for me. I mentioned the role of my Sunday School teachers, the youth group, and the adult men who mentored me. I emphasized that it all began with my baptism, and I took the opportunity to thank them for the faithful ways they helped to raise me in the fear of the Lord. One result of those reflections, Linda later told me, is that a ten-year-old boy named Parker has decided that he wants to be a pastor. Every Sunday after worship, as people are filing out of the sanctuary, he heads to the pulpit to practice his preaching, and then he splashes water in the font. He's always the last one to leave.

The moment from that weekend that haunted me, however, was when the associate pastor began the Sunday morning worship service. Standing at the font he poured a copious amount of water into the clear glass bowl and simply said, "All who are thirsty, Come to the Living Water." I was very curious to learn how this came to be, for

nothing like it ever happened in the first three decades of that church's life. Linda explained that the choir director and two choir members had attended a worship conference at Montreat where the leader had started each service in this way, and they came back extremely enthused, and became insistent that this was something their church should adopt. Linda shared with me that she was actually resistant to the idea initially, even opposed to it. But after a couple of years, which included the conversions and baptisms of a Jewish man and a Hindu man, she saw the effect it had on the congregation as these two men not only renounced sin and evil, but paid the hefty price of leaving behind their families and traditions in order to be followers of Jesus. This, she said, was the catalyst for integrating baptismal identity throughout the congregation.

Another "Linda" I spoke with was one of the elders who attended the Montreat Conference on worship where this baptismal seed was first planted. Particularly meaningful to her was when the leader dunked cedar branches in the font and walked down the aisles, shaking the water onto the people. It was her enthusiasm that prompted the restoration of the font as a focal point of liturgy at Christ Our King.

The liturgy has varied a bit over the ten years that this congregation has been emphasizing baptism, but they have now landed on something quite simple. It goes like this: at the beginning of each worship service the ruling elder who is assisting that day approaches the font and says, "Christ is our Prophet, Priest and King." A large pitcher of water is then poured slowly into the clear, glass bowl, followed by this simple invitation to worship: "Come To The Living Water!" As Linda further reflected on this she said that every time this happens it reminds her of her own testimony that "Jesus Christ Is Lord," and it centers her in Christ, preparing her for another week of living her faith.

That simple liturgy leads me to wonder if there is a way to more frequently evoke images from the Prayer of Thanksgiving Over the Water on occasions other than when the sacrament itself is observed. Focusing on the gift of water, the prayer mentions the Spirit's work in bringing order out of the watery chaos; of the floodwaters in Noah's time; of Israel's safe passage through the Red Sea; of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan; and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on those who have been grafted into Christ.¹⁵ Stained glass images of these great events, once common in churches and cathedrals, are rarely seen in more modern sanctuaries. Perhaps it is time for a different guild of artisans to be commissioned to portray anew the baptismal signs of our Story, helping to recover our sacramental sensibilities.

Throughout its life, the church has always sought ways to help people integrate baptismal imagination. One of the more enduring examples is the introduction and widespread use of the eight-sided font. Beginning as early as the fourth century baptismal fonts were designed with eight sides, suggestive of the ways the baptized are people of the "eighth day." Ambrose, who baptized Augustine pointed out that "not only is the font octagonal, but the baptistry as well, because on the eighth day, by rising, Christ loosens the bondage of death and receives the dead from their graves (*a tumulis suscipit examines*)."¹⁶ There are only seven days of the week, of course, but the suggestion of an eighth day points to the transcendent truth of the way that baptism ushers people from creation to re-creation, with more life to come. Eighth Day disciples, as they live in the high humidity conditions of their baptism, are being prepared for life in the New

¹⁵ *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 410.

¹⁶ Regina Kuehn, *A Place for Baptism* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1993), 55.

Jerusalem which will have a crystal-clear river flowing through the middle of it (Rv 22:1-2). Augustine himself considered the eighth day image to be important, writing,

And that seventh age will be our Sabbath, a day that knows no evening but is followed by the Day of the Lord, an everlasting eighth day, hallowed by the resurrection of Christ prefiguring the eternal rest, not only of the spirit, but of the body as well. Then we shall have holiday, and we shall see and we shall love, and we shall love and we shall praise. Behold, this is how it shall be at the end without end. For what else is our end but to come to that reign?¹⁷

And yet, how many people today, seeing an eight-sided font, would be able to point to its semiotic significance as the consummation of God's covenantal promises? One obvious way, therefore, to recover these forgotten early church treasures is through the educational process of the catechumenate.

Another connection to consider involves the relationship between baptism and marriage. Baptism is the classroom of covenant where we are instructed in the language of enduring promises, of faithfulness, of completion. The baptismal vows we make (or regularly reaffirm) speak a resounding "yes" to God's preemptive choice of us. Similarly, at weddings, vows are exchanged, affirming the choices couples make to love, honor, and cherish one another for the duration of their lives together. Nobody expects a newly-married couple to have a perfect marriage beginning with the return from their honeymoon. Rather, the expectation is for two imperfect people to keep choosing one another, to daily practice the living of their vows, to work out their marriage with fear and trembling. Just so, the newly-baptized are not expected to be candidates for canonization anytime soon. Like marriage, baptism is marked by a covenant day, and it is then characterized by the daily choices to honor the object of one's commitment. These covenant environments represent the primary arenas of God's grace where we are invited

¹⁷ Regina Kuehn, *A Place for Baptism* (Chicago, IL: Liturgy Training Publications, 1993), 53-54.

to imperfectly practice our sacred vows. In both cases – baptism and marriage – the covenantal relationship is completed and perfected only in death.

A final implication to consider, one which was mentioned in the Introduction, is related to parenting. The church in general, and the “little church”¹⁸ in particular needs to do everything it can to raise up children of God. For many of the reasons related to formation already discussed in Chapter I, the earlier we start the better. How we *begin* affects who we *become*. I like the way Leonard Sweet indirectly argues for infant baptism as a parenting responsibility.

As parents, giving our children the freedom to choose their faith is like telling them to choose their language. At birth, parents naturally choose their children’s verbal language. At baptism, parents choose their children’s faith language. When children are born into a family, they learn the family name, identity, traditions, practices, life line, and character. Shared stories and songs create collective identities.¹⁹

The metaphor I used recently when speaking to a couple about whether to dedicate or baptize their children went something like this: From the very beginning of our lives decisions were made on our behalf by our parents, representing our best interests. Our parents decide what kind of food we’re going to eat, what clothes we’re going to wear, and when bedtime is. As we get older, we begin to make those decisions for ourselves, but if they were not made for us in our formative years we would not have a foundation for making good choices; indeed, we wouldn’t have survived in the first place. In my family, education is highly valued. Because it is my expectation that my children will pursue higher education beyond high school, I have assumed the

¹⁸ This is a term Jonathon Edwards (and others before him) used to describe the Christian nuclear family. See “A Puritan’s Mind”, accessed February 20, 2016, <http://www.apuritansmind.com/the-christian-walk/the-christian-family/on-the-family-and-grace-by-jonathan-edwards/>.

¹⁹ Leonard Sweet, *The Well-Played Life: Why Pleasing God Doesn’t Have To Be Such Hard Work* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2014), 96.

responsibility of setting up college funds for each of them, and I deposit money in them every month. I've been doing this since they were quite young. Even though I didn't know where they would go to college, or even *if* they would, I made preparations for them, providing an educational and financial foundation, along with the expectation that their formal instruction would not stop with a high school diploma.

In the same way that parents encourage educational pursuits in their children, preparing them to be contributing citizens in this world, bringing them to the waters of baptism, and training them in the ways of righteousness is the environment that forms them to be citizens of the Kingdom of heaven.

Conclusion

I join Aidan Kavanaugh in saying,

I shall take confidence that the restored Roman rites of Christian Initiation have begun to come alive when I read a treatise on Christian ethics that begins with baptism into Christ; when I see episcopal meetings deciding on Church discipline from a baptismal perspective; when I partake in ecumenical discussions that begin not with Luther or Cranmer or Calvin or Trent, but with baptism; when I am lectured on ministry in terms not of modern sexual roles but of baptism; when I can worship in a parish that consummates its corporate life through Lent at the paschal vigil, gathered around the font where all new life begins.²⁰

Whatever it looks like, it involves what Wendell Berry describes as a “long choosing” – the continual choices, big and small – that both renounce sin and evil, and affirm faith in Christ. “Andy,” one of Berry’s fictitious characters reflects on the formative effects of those choices on his life.

²⁰ This is from his 1977 article, “Christian Initiation in Post-Conciliar Catholicism: A Brief Report,” as quoted in Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989), 478.

On the verge of his journey, he is thinking about choice and chance, about the disappearance of chance into choice, though the choice be as blind as chance. That he is who he is and no one else is the result of a long choosing, chosen and chosen again. He thinks of the long dance of men and women behind him, most of whom he never knew, some he knew, two he yet knows, who choosing one another chose him. He thinks of the choices, too, by which he chose himself as he is now. How many choices, how much chance, how much error, how much hope have made that place and people that, in turn, made him? He does not know. He knows that some who might have left chose to stay, and that some who did leave chose to return, and he is one of them. Those choices have formed in time and place the pattern of membership that chose him, yet left him free until he should choose it which he did once, and now has done again.²¹

The summation of one's life, as Berry suggests, is the accumulating result of the choices made over the span of a lifetime, some of which are made for us, and others by us, but all of which are consequential to the outcome of our lives. Put another way, "(w)e are creatures designed for relationship, and either we are shaped by the relationships that choose us or we choose the relationships on the basis of the person we intend to become."²² Being anchored in baptismal identity and purpose enables individuals (and whole communities of people) to move within a sacred framework from which to make holy choices, resulting in meaningful lives. More like swimming than walking, this is the sacred movement of a journey toward Christ, and the reintegrative process of becoming more and more like him.

²¹ Wendell Berry, *Remembering* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988), 60.

²² Erwin Raphael McManus, *The Artisan Soul: Crafting Your Life into a Work of Art* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 118.

VI. Conclusion: The Signs and Seals of Deliverance

But we, who have undertaken god, can never finish.

~Rainer Maria Rilke

*When you put your hand in the flowing stream,
you touch the last that has gone before and the first of what is to come.*

~Leonardo da Vinci

*Thus we see now what in these days God calls us to.
We are now planted by the waters in which some Christians wade to the ankles
(and be we thankful for that), some can but creep, as it were in the way of grace,
and some, it may be, can walk on with some strength;
some have yet gone deeper, till they be wholly drenched in grace,
and this should we all labor after.*

~John Cotton, *Way of Life or God's Way and Course* [1641]

I shall never forget the scene. With a mug of black coffee in hand, I was on a walk through my woodsy neighborhood early one spring morning. As the sun began to bathe the landscape with light I came over a hill and was able to look down into a horse coral where I saw my neighbor, Mary, hunched over a foal. As I came closer it became apparent that the foal had just been born: she was unsteady on her hooves, and still wet. While the mother mare stood close by and kept a watchful eye, Mary straddled the foal, pressing her face up against the side of the newborn's face, vigorously rubbing its neck. I had never seen anything quite like it before, but it all looked very intimate, up close, personal, even affectionate.

A day or two later when I ran into Mary at the post office I asked her about that peculiar morning. "What was that thing you were doing the other day with that foal?" Very matter-of-factly, almost as if she was annoyed to have to explain such a thing to a city boy, Mary responded with a single word: "Imprinting." Seeing that the word wasn't registering for me, she continued: "If, in the first hours of its life, a horse is exposed to you, where it gets your smell, and hears your voice, it's much easier to train as it grows up. From now on I'm like a surrogate mother to that horse, and it will respond to my voice, and trust me to lead it. We've bonded."

Imprinting. It begins with our baptism into Christ, where we get acquainted with the voice of the Son, where we become familiar with his ways. And, it develops as we practice our baptisms, entering the rhythms of a life of discipleship, most significantly as we exercise the holy affirmations and the holy denials of our new life: "No" to sin and evil; "Yes" to the Kingdom of God and the Jesus Way. We hear the voice; we heed the voice. We get trained up in righteousness.

From the time when we are still wet behind the ears, we are influenced and formed by other people. Observations concerning infants reveal that they begin to mirror their mother's facial expressions long before they can speak their first word. As children mature it becomes apparent that they are unnervingly astute, observing and then imitating the behaviors they are exposed to, both for good and for bad.

Imitating others does not end once one reaches physical maturity. We continue to be influenced by others around us, and we have a strong tendency to adopt various versions of their values, idiosyncrasies, and lifestyles as our own. The notion, for example, that married couples begin to look and act more similarly as the years go by is a real phenomenon, because people in long-term proximity to one another tend to mimic each other's facial expressions.

Unfortunately, healthy models showing us how to live Christianly are spotty. Almost every Christian I have ever known has, at some point, disappointed me. That, however, does not mean we should stop imitating people; it just means that we need to choose carefully, searching for men and women who are living purposefully, sacrificially, courageously, as people of truth and grace, ones in whom the fruits of the Spirit are evident. Integrity, more so than perfection, is the chief criterion in the selection of models that mime messiah.

Six hundred years ago Thomas À Kempis wrote a book. *The Imitation of Christ* has become one of the most beloved of devotional classics, second only to the Bible in the number of languages it has been translated into. Even if the book itself was never

read, however, the title alone would be instructive: the goal of the Christian life is to become more and more like Jesus.¹

Nobody knows how to do this innately. Our natural instinct is to go the way of Adam, rebelling against God. Reconditioning our minds and hearts for life in the Kingdom of God requires a mimetic energy influenced by the saints and other more ordinary heroes of the faith, not exactly mimicking, but emulating, imitating, but not copying. It avoids living one's faith vicariously through another, while modeling a life of discipleship after someone who is mature in Christ, and who manifests spiritual fruit. St. Paul claimed to be one among numerous such models for the church in Philippi when he wrote, "Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us" (Phil 3:17).² The letter to the church in Ephesus, however, goes directly to the source, saying, "Therefore be imitators of *God*, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us..." (Eph 5:1-2; italics mine).

Rene Girard, the founder of mimetic theory, discovered a simple but powerful pattern detectable in all interpersonal relationships: "imitation is the fundamental mechanism of human behavior."³ In other words, we become and we behave like the people with whom we keep company. This is why, with both warning and encouragement, St. John wrote, "Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good" (3 John 11). The baptized lifestyle is the art of imitating the Master Artist, the one who both created all things good, and the one who is restoring goodness to all things. It is

¹ Thomas À Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ: How Jesus Wants Us to Live*, trans. William Griffin (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000).

² A similar exhortation appears in 2 Thessalonians 3:7 when Paul, along with Silvanus and Timothy, wrote, "...you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us."

³ "Rene Girard and Mimetic Theory," Imitatio.org, n.d., accessed December 19, 2015, <http://www.imitatio.org/brief-intro/>.

this godly mission of goodness that gets reflected in children of God as they practice the art of imitating Christ. Michael Polanyi expands on the concept:

All arts are learned by intelligently imitating the way they are practiced by other persons in whom the learner places his confidence. To know a language is an art, carried on by tacit judgments and the practice of unspecifiable skills. The child's way of learning to speak from his adult guardians is therefore akin to the young mammal's and young bird's mimetic responses to its nurturing, protecting and guiding seniors. The tacit coefficients of speech are transmitted by inarticulate communications, passing from an authoritative person to a trusting pupil, and the power of speech to convey communication depends on the effectiveness of this mimetic transmission.⁴

This “mimetic transmission” is the art of making disciples, the journey of beginning in, and becoming like Christ.

Jamie Smith, commenting on Charles Taylor's observation on the role of art, points to “...a fundamental shift from art as *mimesis* to art as *poesis* – from art *imitating* nature to art *making* its world.”⁵ It is the sense of the Greek word *poiema* used in the New Testament: “For we are *poems*, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God previously prepared to be our way of life” (Eph 2:10, my translation). Like good art, disciples do not merely look good; rather, their lives have agency, and are generative exhibitors of the Kingdom. Good art moves us. Good poetry inspires us. Those who are baptized into Christ are God's living poems, artistic agents in the redemptive work of re-making the world. The poetic nature of baptism suggests that it is less about penmanship than it is about workmanship.

⁴ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 206.

⁵ James K.A. Smith, *How (Not) To Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014), 74.

Again, this notion of becoming “like Christ” is not merely mimetic; it involves the actual participation in the very nature of Christ in the fullness of his essence. As Leonard Sweet suggested during an online class discussion on February 9, 2015, “...it is not ‘imitation’ but ‘implantation’ and ‘impartation’ through the hypostatic union with the Holy Spirit” that is the goal of discipleship. Additionally, Sweet frequently emphasizes the idea that we are not merely *mimicking* Jesus, but *manifesting* him. The act of baptism activates us for a life that is both mimetic and poetic.

The lifelong dynamic of baptism as a lifestyle is what makes it endlessly meaningful, offering both descriptive and prescriptive language to identify not only what is, but what should be. Baptism offers a corrective (repent!) when lives lose their holy aim, and it provides affirmation (beloved!) when relationally reconciled. This is the tension (not so much the “balance”) of holding a coin on the edge of the Gospel’s narrow way. Baptism provides the boundaries and guardrails necessary to stay on the Way both toward and with Jesus.

People who are splashed in the sacred waters grow to develop their sacramental senses: becoming alert to the variety of smells, sounds, sights, tastes, and feelings associated with water and its semiotic significance, where “everything in it is charged with value and encoded with meanings.”⁶ Each of the senses serves this sacred purpose: pointing to the Spirit who brooded over the water, pointing to the One who commanded the chaotic waters to come to order; pointing to the Son who came dripping up out of the Jordan; all pointing to the Threesome giver of life who is partial to water as an agent of both creation and re-creation. As Tom Long proposes, “To be baptized is a sign that

⁶ Marilyn Chandler McEntyre. *Caring for Words in a Culture of Lies* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 78.

everything we are – work and play, personality and character, commitments and passions, family and ethnicity – is gathering up and given shape and definition by our identity as one of God’s own children.”⁷ Growing into such a sacred identity is the baptismal process, a holy lifestyle, requiring a lifetime of practice.

Beginning and Becoming

Paraphrasing anthropologist Mary Douglas (1921-2007), Leonard Sweet provides the following metaphor:

...ancient writings, such as the Hebrew Scriptures, were not written in linear sequences, but in circuitry. You start at the beginning, and end back at the beginning, but not the beginning where you began. Rather, you end at a new beginning, where you have grown and matured, discovered something new, and found something newly valued.⁸

That journey leads us ever more deeply into the discovery of God – the author and perfecter of our “never- ending” story.

The central thesis of this dissertation has worked around and developed an understanding of baptism as both a beginning and a becoming. As has been demonstrated, these are not altogether new ideas, but ones which have been in need of recovery by applying fresh language and images (or signs and signifiers to use more semiotic-specific language) to re-direct imaginations which far too often get culturally hijacked, leading people astray. This project has attempted to restore the baptismal coin on its rightful edge, avoiding the tendency to highlight either its beginning or its

⁷ Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them With Singing: The Christian Funeral* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 143.

⁸ Leonard Sweet, *The Well-Played Life: Why Pleasing God Doesn't Have To Be Such Hard Work* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2014), 46.

becoming, and suggesting that it is a both/and proposition. It is the combination of catechesis and mystagogy, the integration of a rock-solid foundation with a flowing river-of-life.

Expanding on Augustine’s personal and pastorally-informed awareness that discipleship is less about striving for perfection than it is about opening oneself to the action of grace, Larry Seidentop wrote, “Even conversion is only the beginning of a difficult journey, a journey during which the new self is assailed by doubts and temptations that can be overcome only with the help of grace.”⁹ The same grace that assumes a newlywed couple will not have mastered the art of marriage upon their return from a honeymoon, is the grace given to the newly baptized. In both instances, the vows made establish a “til death do us part” relationship, and take a lifetime of practice to fulfill. Grace is needed at every step of the covenantal journey.

Signed, Sealed, Delivered

When the prophet Jeremiah bought the field at Anathoth – a demonstration of God’s purchasing power to *deliver* Israel from Babylonian warfare – he “*signed* the deed, (and) *sealed* it, got witnesses...” (Jer 32:10; italics mine) for the purpose of establishing a covenantal relationship. The enduring purpose of that covenant, though taking a variety of forms over the years, was essentially unchanged in its intent, as summarized by Jeremiah:

They shall be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me for all time, for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them, never to

⁹ Larry Seidentop, *Inventing The Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 103.

draw back from doing good to them; and I will put the fear of me in their hearts, so that they may not turn from me (Jer 32:38-40).

The words “signed, sealed, delivered” as pertaining to a land contract are the descriptive metaphors for a life in Christ that are enacted and effected in baptism. I consider them in turn.

Signed

Included among Britain’s nineteenth century literary circles were collectors of authors’ autographs. It was a popular pastime which involved acquiring the signatures of popular writers, not unlike other hobbyists who collect baseball cards, stamps, or coins. The significance of the signature, however, lay in its semiotic connection to the author in perpetuity. As Josh Lauer once claimed, “(w)hereas writing makes language visible, signing renders the author present and, under the proper conditions of textual belief, immortal.”¹⁰ In very real ways, authors remain present to us through their words. Signing their works maintains the connection between the writer and what they wrote.

A collection of sixty-six books comprise the canon of inspired scripture, each one an important piece of divine communiqué. Although most are attributable to particular historical figures – notably, Moses, David, Isaiah, and Paul – the church has understood those writers to be mere agents of the True Author, as they went about their work of transcribing the Word of God.

Baptism is the sign of the divine autograph, inscribed, not on pages, but carved in hearts. The baptized are the living signatures of the Author and the Editor of our faith.

¹⁰ As described and quoted by Pamela Corpron Parker, “Woman of Letters: Elizabeth Gaskell’s Autograph Collection and Victorian Celebrity,” in *Material Women, 1750-1950: Consuming Desires and Collecting Practices*, eds. Maureen Daly Goggin, and Beth Fowkes Tobin (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 275.

Moreover, the collective church community comprises an autograph album, assigned with a sacred mission, revealing the signs of God’s presence, marking the world with the indelible ink of water. Or, to rotate the prism slightly, God is an autograph collector, and each name, once dipped in the water, is added to the “Lamb’s book of life” (Rev 21:27). God is not satisfied until the pages are full of the personal names of the baptized, inscribed for eternity in the Three-Fold Name.

When God instructed Moses to bless Aaron and his sons with what is commonly known today as the “Aaronic blessing,” it was followed by this often-overlooked bit of divine commentary: “So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them” (Nm 6:27). This is what happens in the sacrament of baptism: God’s Name is placed on our given names, naming us for our beginnings, destining us for our future becomings. A further implication is made by Ferguson who points out that “the Greek phrase ‘into the name of’ (*eis to onoma*) occurs mainly in commercial or legal documents and carries the idea of ‘into the ownership or possession’ of someone.”¹¹ Having the divine name imposed on us, in word and in sacrament, grafts us into the family-of-God-tree.

Names are important. *Our* names are important. As are the names we associate with for the ways they both identify and influence us. The Bible is full of them, including genealogies – lists of names, one after another – celebrating the interpersonal and connective nature of our lives, naming the people to whom we owe our very existence. Moreover, each name represents not only a particular life but a specific identity. Thus Adam was “of the ground,” Moses was “drawn out” of water, Isaac “laughed,” and Jesus “saves.” Addressing a person by using their proper name honors the unique gifts assigned

¹¹ Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), 135.

to them. Thus, “The friends send you their greetings. Greet the friends there, each *by name*” (3 Jn 15; italics mine).

However, it is increasingly rare in the modern age for names to be accompanied by such identity and purpose. The power of being baptized in the *threesome* Name, therefore, is an act which imparts a *gladsome* identity to persons no matter their given name. Any Tom, Dick, or Harry can live by the sign of Father, Son, and Spirit.

And yet, as the voice of God spoke from the heavens at Jesus’ baptism, it is significant to notice that his name was not used, but rather his relationship to the Father: “this is my beloved *Son*, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt 3:17, Mk 1:11, and Lk 3:22). The primary sign of the baptized is found, not in their given name, but in the experience of being given into adoption as the daughters and sons of “Abba, Father.”¹²

Similarly, when the Evangelist speaks of the saving agency of Jesus’ atonement he does not refer to him in functional terms like Christ or Messiah, but in terms of his relationship to the Father: “For God so love the world that he gave his only *Son*...” (Jn 3:16; italics mine). By emphasizing this relational quality, baptism protects people from the erosive effects of reification where their worth is reduced to their capacity to produce and to consume.

In nearly every epistle attributed to the Apostle Paul he begins his letters with a greeting which celebrates his audience in the glowing terms of “saints,” and only then moves into more confrontational language (Galatians is the notable exception). What initially can seem like a bait and switch, where he starts off with commendations, and then quickly shifts into criticism, is actually one and the same, and the latter naturally

¹² cf. especially Rm 8:15, and Gal 4:5-6 where adopted children are encouraged to address God with the more familiar and intimate term, *Abba*, sometimes translated as “Daddy,” or “Papa.”

follows the former. By first reminding them of their fundamental identity, Paul is showing them how they ought to live. The primary motivation for living a life of morality emerges from this baptismal identity. Only when we know who we are can we make decisions which best honor our genuine self, rather than merely following somebody else's rules and expectations. Essentially Paul is saying, "You are the *holy* ones; now *live* like it." The baptized are the living signatures of the God in whose name they are claimed.

Sealed

When Jezebel was intent on helping her husband, King Ahab, acquire a neighboring vineyard that was not for sale, she wrote letters, giving orders to the elders and nobles to kill Naboth, the owner of the vineyard. After writing the letters she "sealed them with his seal" (1 Kings 21:8) giving them the weight and authority of the king. Although Jezebel inappropriately impersonated the king, the orders were carried out because they were believed to be from Ahab as evidenced by their accompanying seal. Baptism carries the weight of the divine seal, the assurance of being *bona fide* children of God.

Years later, when Jesus admonished his followers to work "for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you," he went on to make the self-referential claim that "it is on him that God the Father has set his *seal*" (Jn 6:27; italics mine). The sense of the word (*sphragidzo*) is that of setting an identifying mark on a person. It may be that, according to John's Gospel, which actually has no explicit reference to Jesus' baptism, the seal he was referring to was the Holy Spirit, for as the Baptist relayed the words he heard from God, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend

and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.” John concludes, “And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God” (Jn 1:33-34).

A similar sense of the word appears in the letter to the Ephesians. Referring to their belief in Christ, the writer claims that they “were marked with the *seal* of the promised Holy Spirit...” (Eph 1:13; italics mine). Again equating the Spirit with the seal of God’s approval, the writer adds “...do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with which you were marked with a *seal* for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30; italics mine).

Paul makes the same correlation in his second letter to the Corinthians, writing, “But it is God who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us, by putting his *seal* on us and giving us his *Spirit* in our hearts as a first installment” (2 Cor 1:22; italics mine). The Holy Spirit sets its seal of approval on the baptized, as evidenced by the fruits of the Spirit they bear.

The image gets further elaborated in the Revelation where John of Patmos saw in a vision an angel who, as it ascended, cried out to four other angels, “Do not damage the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal on their foreheads” (Rev 7:3). While there is little scholarly consensus as to just what that seal looks like, the baptismal “seal” represents the very thing indicated, namely, ritual marking that sets people apart. This, by the way, is why some rites of blessing call for anointing oil to be traced in the sign of the cross on a person’s forehead, along with the words, “You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and grafted into Christ forever.”¹³

¹³ *Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 414.

As the sign of circumcision was, under the old covenant, the recognizable seal of righteousness (cf. Rom 4:11), baptism is the new covenant sign marking the faithful with the seal of divine approval.

Delivered

In describing the grand miracle of the atonement, C.S. Lewis introduces first one, then another parable to illustrate the effect of Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension and present reign on humanity – images both of which reflect the personal and intimate nature of salvation, and the necessity for divine condescension. It is like a power lifter, he says, who stoops under the weight of a great burden, almost to the point of disappearing, and then straightens his back to lift it up. Lewis then shifts the images from the gym of weight-lifting to an exquisite metaphor of the waters of baptism.

Or one may think of a diver, first reducing himself to nakedness, then glancing in mid-air, then gone with a splash, vanished, rushing down through green and warm water into black and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the death-like region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to colour and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks the surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover.¹⁴

God in Christ, through a magnificent condescension of love, stoops from the heavens, and dives through the slime of sin to reach us, recovering the “dripping, precious thing” that we once were, and making us just so once again.

But it's not long before many people start to feel wrung out, dry, arid of soul. Baptism is continually calling us to return to the waters, to reconstitute our dehydrated souls through the practices of discipleship, restoring our identity as “dripping, precious”

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1975), 148.

people. Those disciplines, as this dissertation has proposed, involves the primary movements of turning.

- God delivers us from sin and death, and we, therefore, keep turning from the ways of sin and other forms of bondage.
- God delivers us for salvation and life, and we, therefore, keep choosing the way of Jesus who is leading us into Promise.

This ‘special delivery’ of salvation, additionally, signifies the altogether non-transactional nature of one’s new and renewing identity in Christ. And so while Joseph was purchased for twenty pieces of silver (Gn 37:28), and Jesus was obtained for thirty pieces of silver (Mt 26:15), the baptized – though ransomed – cannot be bought. Divine deliverance is duty-free.

Conclusion

Michael’s struggle is everybody’s struggle, one which remains just as real and universal today as when the ancient Akkadians carved out their creation myth on a stone five thousand years ago. The struggle and its ultimate resolution may be summed up by Augustine’s confession: “...you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in you.”¹⁵ Baptism, rather than altogether remedying our restless hearts, points beyond this life, with its myriad imperfections, to the fullness of the Kingdom of God where human desire is ultimately met and satisfied in the eternal presence of the Trinity: chaos giving way to a new order. Until that day, the gift of restlessness is in its power to nudge us nearer to Christ. Our inability to be completely

¹⁵ Rex Warner, trans. *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York: Penguin Group, 1963), 17.

content in this life is what prepares us to be embraced by perfect and enduring Rest. Such is our telos, an end goal that cannot (by design) be fulfilled this side of the *parousia*, but one which is even now signaled by a voice from that future day, ...a voice from heaven saying, "Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord." 'Yes,' says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them" (Rev 14:13). Baptism is what allows people, living between the two advents of Christ, to make sense of and to endure the crucible-like nature of the *present*, in order to inherit resurrection in the *future*.

It has been ten years now since I baptized Michael. When I asked him about it recently he reflected that, while his baptism has not delivered him from the struggles, it has made his struggles more meaningful. By locating his life in the sacramental waters of baptism, he has found that he is more apt and able to remain engaged in the worthy struggle of contending with principalities and powers, while also cooperating with the grace of God. The two fundamental words in the lexicon of baptism (*no* and *yes*) are not new to him. However, his ability to live his faith through the practice of renunciations and affirmations is what, he says, has ushered him more deeply into abundant life.

Michael's testimony reminds me that not only is baptism the sign of our salvation, but in living out of such a baptismal identity we ourselves become more and more the living signs of God's enduring presence and abiding love. There is nothing like baptism that has both the power and the sacramental authority to claim people who have become *resigned* to lives of futility, and *reassigning* them for lives of abundance in the Kingdom of God, making it the chief semiotic of salvation.

Baptism enlarges our vision, inviting people to enter into and to participate in a reality as broad and eternal as the Kingdom of God itself. This increased capacity of our humanity is perhaps what Jesus was referring to when he said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). The way of abundant life is the baptized way of life: “Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I’m Yours.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Stevie Wonder, recorded on *Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I’m Yours*: Motown’s Tamia label, 1970.

Epilogue

This is personal for me. I was baptized by my pastor-father on Easter Sunday, 1963 when I was two months old. Since then, in fits and starts, I have been guided into the life of discipleship through a number of godly people, as I have gradually “learned Christ” (Eph 4:20). While the actual memory of my baptismal day is held mostly by the people who held my infant body on that sacred occasion, my baptismal identity has held me in the container of God’s love, and has expanded in significance as I have grown up in Christ, thereby increasing my capacity to both receive and convey the grace of God. I have found it to be the single most significant sacred sign, capable of ushering me into a crucified and resurrected way of life. The same eight-sided oak font from which I was claimed as a child of God over fifty years ago sits prominently in my study, along with my baptismal certificate, as not only daily reminders of who I am and to Whom I belong, but as tangible signs which point me toward the good and abundant Way of Life.

Significant for me is what is *not* on display: no academic diplomas, no certificates of completion, no plaques of recognition; just the evidence that I am baptized. As an identity it is more than sufficient, for it gives me both something to live for, and something to die for. No mere metaphor (which is limited to being expressive), the sacrament of baptism has the power to be enactive and participative.¹

I love the story of Louis IX, King of France who reigned from 1226 to 1270. When asked why he signed his name “Louis of Poisey” rather than “King Louis IX,” he responded,

I think more of the place where I was baptized [*La Collégiale Notre-Dame*] than of Rheims Cathedral where I was crowned. It is a greater thing to be a child of

¹ I am indebted to Leonard Sweet for making this helpful and important distinction during a personal conversation.

God than to be the ruler of a Kingdom. This last I shall lose at death, but the other will be my passport to an everlasting glory.

The quotation is cut upon the stone of the baptistery at the eponymous church in France – St. Louis in Cleveland Heights. Significantly, Louis IX is the only king who has ever been canonized.

When I began the work of organizing a new church in the summer of 1997 I had very little idea of what I was doing. While my vocational identity was already well established the task of a church ‘plant’ was daunting, even intimidating. Failure was a continual fear of mine. I consider it no small grace during this time that I became aware of a lingering temptation within me to treat people as means to the end of a successful new church development. Attention to baptismal theology provided the blessed check and correction to this tendency toward reification by causing me to view people through a sacred lens. Happily, in all the subsequent years, I have been unable to fully fathom the depths of this sacred well of blessing.

The foregoing work is the fruit of that fertile congregational environment.

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From the beginning of this project I have had the sense that I was standing on the shoulders of giants. From the biblical writers, to the church fathers, to modern theologians and colleagues, I have been enriched by the many thoughtful men and women who came before me, and a handful who have come alongside me. I was frequently startled to find that – just when I thought I had an original idea – it turned out to be something I unintentionally ripped off of somebody else. The voices of mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers (and in all cases both the literal and the figurative ones) have influenced me more thoroughly than I will ever know. A handful of them deserve specific mention.

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The “Michael” who is named in both the Introduction and the Conclusion is a composite of many people living and dead who have called me their pastor over the last twenty-five years. The proper name choice, however, is intended to honor the uncommon friendship I enjoy with Michael King LeRoy.

My debt to them all is deep. My gratitude deeper still.

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Finally, this work is lovingly dedicated to two groups of people – a small one and a large one: my parents who first brought me to the sacramental waters, and the beloved community of Colbert Presbyterian Church who taught me how to swim.

Eric of Baltimore
Baptism of the Lord, 2016

*But friends, that's exactly who we are: children of God.
And that's only the beginning. Who knows how we'll end up!*
~1 John 3:2 (MSG)

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