



**“Baptism Matters”**

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Matt. 3:13-17 (NRSV)***

Christians around the world today are reading and reflecting on the account of Jesus’ baptism, which Susan read from Matthew’s gospel. I realize that the theology of baptism is not a hot topic in the circles that most of us move in, but my goal today is to convince us that baptism matters—and particularly that the meaning of baptism matters substantially for all of us.

Before I go any further, I want to preface my explanation of baptism by saying what baptism is not. Baptism is not an “admissions stamp” that we get on our foreheads like the rubber stamp that we used to get on our hands at high school dances to indicate that we had paid our fee, and were free to come and go without having to pay again. Baptism is also not a “ticket” we need to show the conductor when we get on the train to heaven.

By contrast, the sacrament of baptism, we say in our United Church of Christ (UCC) tradition, is an outward and visible sign of God’s inward and invisible grace. We believe that God’s grace is available to us *with* and *without* participation in the sacraments. So we participate in the sacraments, not because we *must*, but because we *may*. We participate in the sacraments not as a requirement of God, or as a necessity of salvation, but as a means of deepening our understanding and experience of God’s grace.

Bluntly stated, in our UCC tradition, we *do not* believe that one is destined to hell if one has *not* been baptized, or if one has *not* participated in communion, but we *do* believe that participating in the sacraments does give us a taste of heaven right here on earth. In sum, we participate in the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist (communion) for the purposes of Christian nurture, rather than as a requirement of salvation or membership in some exclusive church club.

II

That Jesus was baptized is theologically significant for Christians. Theologically speaking, the gospels announce that Jesus is divine through the parabolic pronouncement of the dove that says, “This is my beloved son.”

Jesus' participation in this sacred act is the basis for baptism eventually becoming, for Protestants, one of the two sacraments in our tradition. In order for a religious practice to become a sacrament, for Protestants, the practice has to be one that Jesus himself participated in. The other sacrament (for Protestants) is the Sacrament of Holy Communion, which we celebrate today.

The other special practices which Catholic and Orthodox Christians participate in, and call sacraments, are confirmation, ordination, marriage, unction (healing/confession), and burial. These same liturgies are called "rites" by Protestants. These rites are important for us, but less significant than sacraments, because Christ did *not* participate in them.

Through our participation in baptism, like Christ, we nurture our relationship with God and deepen our experience of God's grace. Through this sacrament, we also make several bold claims about persons who are baptized which are implicit in this sacred act.

The first claim is that we dare to identify ourselves as God's own beloved sons and daughters. Through the waters of our baptisms—whether we were baptized as infants or believers, and regardless of how much water was used when we were baptized—we were each recognized as a child of God, as one of God's own beloved children, and God was, and is, pleased with us.

Another claim we make in the sacrament of baptism is that we are dedicated to life in the Christian household, and to the service of Almighty God. Even if we drift from God's household, and even if we resist our Christian vocation, God never gives up on us. God always keeps the porch light on for us. God always has the welcome mat out for us. God's continues to call each of us to the vocation of faithfulness that is uniquely ours.

### III

So, baptism is a sign of God's grace, a rite of initiation into the household of faith, and an affirmation of our unique vocation in the Christian faith. It is also a theological statement about our identity as human beings. It is a way that we affirm our mutual identity and equality as human beings in the eyes of God.

The history of the Christian church, and its ability to embrace the gospel truth that baptism is a gift of grace offered to all, is mixed—even in the history of the Christian church in the United States.

On a positive note, the whole concept of Rousseauian democracy, though veiled, was built on the Christian doctrine of baptism—that we are all equal in the eyes of God, and therefore imbued with inalienable rights. Arguments in support of civil rights throughout this country have most often been grounded on ideas of equality that can be traced to this interpretation of the meaning of baptism.

## IV

This baptismal argument for equality surfaced prominently when the Rev. Antoinette Brown, the first woman ordained to the Christian ministry in a Mainline Church, was pursuing ordination (and was ordained) at the South Butler Congregational Church in upstate New York in 1853.<sup>1</sup> The compelling argument made and sustained in support of Antoinette Brown's ordination was based on Congregationalists' views of baptism—that she, as a woman, was ontologically fit to be ordained to the Christian ministry, because she had already been ordained by the waters of her baptism.

(The word *ontologically* has to do with “being.” To say that Brown was ontologically fit to be ordained means that the very fact that she was a woman was not a stumbling block to her becoming ordained to the Christian ministry. There were and are, of course, many other requirements and tests for ministerial fitness that ordination candidates must meet in order to be ordained, but the ontological question was and is a profound one that had to be resolved before our forebears would ordain women. Other requirements generally include the following: having obtained certain educational credentials, aligning theologically with one's denomination, receiving affirmation from a particular community of faith that one's vocational gifts for ministry are evident.)

Similar controversies to those which Antoinette Brown faced in the 1850s persist to this day in more conservative Protestant denominations and in the Catholic and Orthodox churches, where women's ordination is still prohibited and where women are still considered subordinate to men.

The fact that arguments in support of women's ordination are not as compelling in these other traditions has to do with the fact that these other traditions have different beliefs about baptism, and other doctrines that sustain the exclusivity of male dominance of the priestly vocation. The fine points of these doctrines are subjects for another day.

## V

A further example in which Christian views of baptism were at issue in matters of human equality in this country, beyond the ordination of women, can be traced to controversies about the baptism of slaves in the antebellum South.

I am reminded, for example, that January 1, 2008, was the 145<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and that there was a time in the history of Christianity in this nation when one of the hot topics about baptism was whether owners should baptize slaves. Some argued *in favor* of the practice—often for inauspicious reasons, such as that Christianizing the slaves would make them more compliant—while others argued *against* baptism, for fear that the slaves would see themselves as equal to their owners in the eyes of God and rebel.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoinette\\_Louisa\\_Brown](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antoinette_Louisa_Brown)

<sup>2</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, first ed. in paperback (Oxford University Press: New York, 1980), p. 96-150.

So you see, baptism is not only a theological act, it was and is, in debates about women's ordination and in the antebellum south, a subversive social and political act. English law was ambiguous about whether the necessary effect of baptism was emancipation, but the general belief within the church was that baptism did lead to emancipation, so some slave holders refused to catechize slaves, while others used their legal and economic power in the community to pass civil laws that explicitly ruled that baptism did not signify emancipation.<sup>3</sup> What a sorry time that was in the history of our faith and nation.

If one reads the Bible in its entirety, of course—not just proof-texting for passages that assume or affirm the institution of slavery—one discovers (as liberation theologians in every Christian movement have concluded) that the overriding message of scripture is one of liberation, rather than of subjugation. So we conclude from the examples of women's suffrage and the emancipation of slaves that baptism matters, and that this doctrine has significantly influenced our own views of women's suffrage and civil rights not only in the United Church of Christ and our predecessor denominations, but in Mainline Protestantism, and in the American polis.

## VI

Another case in which what Christians have believed about baptism has been shown to matter emerged some 10 years after the Emancipation Proclamation was declared, and became a matter of public debate in a literary magazine called *Puck*.<sup>4</sup>

(*Puck*, as history buffs may recall, was a Victorian precursor to modern periodicals like *The New Yorker* and *Atlantic Monthly*, and was well known for its political commentary and satirical cartoons, covering such topics as Tammany Hall, the labor movement, and famous Congressional debates.)

One cartoon that appeared in *Puck* was drawn by artist Charles J. Taylor, and dealt with a theological dispute between two opposing faculty groups at my seminary alma mater, Andover Newton Theological School.<sup>5</sup> The debate was about the true meanings of Christian salvation and the sacrament of baptism.

The hot topic in Boston, in the 1870s, surfaced in the mission fields of the Far East and Africa, when indigenous peoples, whom Andover's alumni were trying to convert, were refusing baptism until the missionaries could provide compelling responses to their questions about whether their ancestors who had died would be welcomed in heaven, since they had not been baptized.

In short, the indigenous position was: no grace for their forebears, then no baptism for them. This point was clearly stated on a banner in the cartoon that hung like a backdrop between two palm trees on the indigenous people's island.

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<sup>3</sup> Raboteau, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puck\\_%28magazine%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puck_%28magazine%29)

<sup>5</sup> In the cartoon, the seminary is referred to simply as "Andover," which was the stand-alone Congregational part of the seminary which merged with the American Baptist seminary, Newton, around 1960.

In Taylor's cartoon, the liberals and the conservatives occupy two separate fishing boats, which are adrift near the shore of this island. The liberals are in the foreground, and the conservatives are in the background. On the shore, a group of caricatured native people awaits the resolution of the theologians' heady debate.

One sees, upon close inspection, that, despite the fact that the baptism of the natives was the goal, the only people in the water are the theologians, who are pulling on each other's beards and preparing to beat some truth into their opponents.

The captions over the liberals' heads expressed the liberal answer, which was "yes to the ancestors' salvation," while the captions over the conservatives' head indicated a "no" to salvation of the indigenous people's ancestors. Eventually, the liberal view prevailed. But not without a fight which, I am sorry to say, did more to affirm the doctrine of sin than the doctrine of salvation or the theology of baptism.

The caption under the cartoon reads, quite humorously, "Why do the heathen rage? They don't, Gentle Reader. They are Taking Things very Peacefully and Pleasantly, while the Andover Missionaries are Settling their little Theological Differences among Themselves."

So you see, within the American Protestant churches, at large, and within our own Congregational heritage, in particular, we have brought some "baggage" to both the sectarian and secular conversations about baptism—some of it inspiring, and some of disappointing—and yet the fundamental message of grace keeps piercing through this sacrament, like the dove in Matthew's gospel, saying "This is my beloved..., with you I am well pleased."

## VII

Perhaps the challenge for us today isn't so much about the divinity of Christ. It isn't so much about the equality of the genders, races, or ethnicities—at least not within our UCC tradition. Our modern challenge—within the UCC—isn't even about whether those who have never heard the gospel preached will be saved. The challenge for us, instead, is trusting that the words—"you are my beloved"—are truly meant for us.

I wonder, "Why is it so hard for so many of us to believe that we are beloved?"

I suspect that the answers are as unique as the individuals in the pews and on the membership roles. No doubt there is a conflation of reasons for these doubts for many of us. Some, I suspect, doubt our belovedness because we were raised in traditions that were selective about who was "fit" for baptism, and, therefore, the answer to the "who" question never seemed to be "me."

For those who doubt the sense of welcome, well, maybe that's for good reason. Maybe we've felt rejected on account of gender, marital status, theological differences, and the like; and yet, Christ's own participation in baptism created a theological circle that drew us in.

If the sacraments are truly signs and symbols of God's grace—and this is what we believe in our tradition—then we are welcome to participate in them, not because of our own merit or deeds, not by some adequate confession, not on account of our identity, not even on account of our amendment of life. We are, instead, welcome to participate, on account of God's radical hospitality—God's gift of grace. This is an essential gospel truth—that baptism is a gift of grace offered, but not required, of all people.

I suspect that, for most, doubts about our belovedness weren't fostered overnight, so that trust will not be forged overnight either. Yet, we are invited repeatedly through the sacraments to be on a journey toward increasing trust in God's grace.

To that end, I offer a few baby steps to help us progress. Baby step number one is to become, and to take seriously the invitation to be, part of this welcoming community, and to foster a culture of grace that will not only sustain us, but will reinforce the message and meaning of our baptism.

Given that so many of us come to this church with a sense of woundedness from other faith communities, we are especially sensitive to inclusiveness. It would be easy for us to wince and run at the sign of any sense—real or imagined that we aren't as fully welcomed as we would hope, so I challenge all of us today to resist the impulse to run, and to redouble our commitments to ensure not only our own sense of welcome, but the welcome of those who may cause us to wince.

Baby step number two, I encourage us to participate fully in the sacraments of baptism and communion—not because we must, but because we may. I encourage us to reclaim these sacraments, not as an obligation, but as an invitation to receive spiritual nourishment so that we might know that God loves and welcomes us just as we are.

And baby step number three, I encourage us to participate in *lectio divina*, in praying the scriptures. Let us in particular pray this scripture—like a mantra—until its meaning seeps deeply into our souls:

You are my beloved; with you, I am well pleased.

You are my beloved; with you, I am well pleased.

You are my beloved; with you, I am well pleased.

Friends, believe the good news of the gospel. We are God's beloved. God is pleased with us. Not because of what we *do*, not because of what we *do not* do, but because of *who we are*—God's own sons and daughters. We do not earn this identity. We need only receive it, and trust that God's goodness and grace are sufficient, in order to enjoy it. This is truly good news for all of us. Thanks be to God. Amen.