

The Great River of Grace: Baptism and the Christian Life

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There is a great river that flows through the Bible. It started as a tiny spring in the Garden of Eden, bubbling up beside the tree of life. It overflowed its banks in Genesis, sweeping away the wickedness of the world. It stepped aside at God's command to let the people of Israel escape from Egypt. This river rushed through the desert in the visions of Isaiah, showing the captives the way home. It lapped at the ankles of John the Baptist when he announced that at last the kingdom of heaven had come near. It caressed the face of the Messiah when the voice of God said: "This is my beloved Son." This great river goes by many names: the Nile, the Red Sea, the Jordan. Amos called it Justice and Righteousness. The woman at the well knew it as Living Water. We sometimes call it Grace.

Of course, there is really not just *one* river in the Bible, but many. Yet there is one sacred story that connects all of these scattered streams. It is the story of our salvation. It is the power of the one, holy Triune God. It is the river of everlasting, overflowing life. It is the water of baptism—flowing through the hearts of believers and filling them with the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit.

In this essay, we will visit five landmarks on that great river: one for each of the five theological themes of baptism: (1) Participation in Christ's Death and Resurrection; (2) Conversion, Pardon, and Cleansing; (3) The Gift of the Spirit; (4) Incorporation into the Body of

Christ; and (5) The Sign of the Kingdom.¹ At each of these five stopping points, we will explore the implications of baptism for the Christian life and liturgy. I will draw on examples from the 2008 Korean Worship and Music Conference throughout.

1. *Participation in Christ's Death and Resurrection.*

To a group of Christians gathered near the Tiber River in Rome, the Apostle Paul wrote: “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” (Romans 6:3-4). What does this mean? No doubt the members of the Roman church remembered their own baptisms: how they stepped into that dark and mysterious water. It *was* like dying, in a way; the old life was buried beneath the water. They heard the sacred, triune name of God, and felt the Holy Spirit washing over them. Emerging from the water they were shivering and cold, like newborn babies. A new life—the *Christian* life—had begun.

Baptism is the font or source of the Christian life. By the grace of God, and through the mystery of our faith, we are able to take part in this central event of Christian faith and human history—Christ’s terrible suffering and death on the cross, and his glorious resurrection from the dead. By our baptism, Christ’s story becomes our story; his death, our death; his life, our life. This isn’t just common life, ordinary life, everyday life. This is *resurrection* life, eternal and abundant life! This is the life of the risen Christ.

Resurrection life is no ordinary life—but it *does* have a dramatic impact on the way we live our ordinary, everyday lives. We are called to live as new and redeemed people, called to walk in newness of life. We are no longer captive to the powers of sin and death. We are liberated to live as God intended: fully human, faithful and free, with dignity, justice, compassion, and love. It is through our faith in Christ Jesus, signed and sealed in the sacrament of baptism, that Christ has come to abide in us, and we in him.

How do we testify to the reality of Christ’s resurrection in our worship? Most importantly, with joy and thanksgiving. Christian life and liturgy should bear witness to our faith in the resurrection, by being a *celebration* of new life in Christ. If our worship isn’t lively, full of life, it will be hard for people to believe that Christ is risen indeed! On the other hand, we also proclaim

the death of Christ—his solidarity with all those who suffer. Our worship must address the realities of suffering and oppression in this world, making room for the faithful lament of those who have been sinned against. Both of these themes are essential. Christian worship is, quite simply, a matter of life and death—or better yet, a matter of death and life! As those who are baptized into Christ’s death and resurrection, we live with the faith that death does not have the last word.

At the Korean Worship and Music Conference, we experienced this profound hope through a modified Easter Vigil service, adapted to incorporate certain elements of Korean folk culture. Instead of a procession with the paschal candle, we entered the worship space with different symbols of illumination—calligraphic banners with references to biblical passages and other theological themes. Rev. Seung Nam Kim preached in the “Chang” style, a Korean form of storytelling accompanied by indigenous percussion instruments and congregational responses. The baptismal reaffirmation and eucharistic liturgies were combined, in a way, through a love feast of bread and water. We were invited to meditate on the pure and simple taste of the water, a sign of the essential, life-giving power of God. Partway through the service, it dawned on me that a different kind of “resurrection” was taking place here. Through the imaginative revival of neglected Korean practices, carefully and thoughtfully woven into a fourth century Mediterranean Easter rite, we were witnessing liturgical renewal in action—not just the renewal of dusty old customs and rituals (however ancient and venerable they might be), but the renewal of the *church* through the creative power of God’s Word.

2. *Conversion, Pardon, and Cleansing.*

At the Pool of Siloam, an ancient *mikvah* bath in old Jerusalem, a blind beggar is emerging from the water (John 9:1-41). Mud streams down his face like tears of joy, and for the first time he is able to see. But a debate quickly ensues among the disciples of Jesus and the religious leaders of Jerusalem—a dispute about sin. What does baptism have to do with sin? The sacrament of baptism is a sign of repentance and conversion, of the cleansing of our sin and the renewal of our lives. When we are bathed in the water of the font, we feel the touch of God’s redeeming love; we are washed clean by God’s overflowing grace. God chooses not to see our

sin any longer.

In one sense, we are like the blind man at the pool of Siloam—baptism changes the way we see the world. Whether we are baptized as infants or adults, being included in the covenant of God’s grace gives us a different way of looking at things. Our eyes are opened to the reality of our own sinfulness *and* to the good news of God’s saving love. We also have a new ethical orientation. Each time we remember or reaffirm our baptism, we reorient ourselves to God’s call to do justice, love kindness, and live with humility.

Although baptism is a one-time event in the life of every believer, conversion is a life-long process of change and growth. In this sense, we are like the religious leaders standing beside the Pool of Siloam, called by Jesus to repent once again of our sin. The life of discipleship requires frequent times of reevaluation and reorientation, looking for the light of Christ in times of darkness, and realigning ourselves with God’s way.

How do we practice this life of constant conversion in our worship? One way is by leading the call to confession and declaration of forgiveness from the font. I did this in the Evensong Service at the Korean Worship and Music Conference, a service designed by Helen Cha-Pyo and devoted to the themes of conversion, pardon, and cleansing. Pouring water into the font during the rite of confession and forgiveness helps to remind us of the grace we have received in baptism, and invites us to reorient ourselves to Christ’s way. There were other dramatic indications of Christ’s peace and reconciliation in this service. We sang the African American spiritual “O Healing River” in Korean and English, a sign of reconciliation among races and cultures. We also experienced an incredible range of musical genres: an organ recital (by Dr. Hyunglak Han), a praise chorus, Taizé refrains, choral anthems (directed by Dr. Sun Min Lee), traditional hymnody, a Peruvian *Gloria*, and the spiritual mentioned above. It was a welcome sign of hope and healing for a church so often divided by “worship wars.”

3. *The Gift of the Spirit.*

By the banks of the Jordan River a crowd has gathered. A wild-eyed preacher is baptizing a gentle stranger. Suddenly the skies are torn open and a brilliant light descends in the shape of a dove. A breathtaking voice from heaven says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:13-17). As Christians, we share the same baptism that Jesus Christ

himself received. Whether you saw it or not, the heavens opened up on the day you were baptized. Whether you felt it or not, the Holy Spirit descended, filling you with the power to live the Christian life. Whether you heard it or not, the very voice of God was speaking: “You are my beloved child, and with you I am well pleased.” What an amazing gift, an awesome calling.

The Christian life is both a *gift* and a *call*. Through baptism, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, who claims us as beloved children of God, and grants us an inheritance of eternal and abundant life, through the grace of Jesus Christ. By this same Spirit, we are empowered to live in faith and equipped for all kinds of ministry in Christ’s name. This is the source of our calling, our Christian vocation.

The Christian life is a life in the Spirit. Sharing Christ’s baptism, anointed by the Spirit, we seek to live as beloved children of God, loving and serving God, and loving and serving one another as Christ first loved us. We don’t do these things by our own power, but only by the power of the Holy Spirit, who is constantly at work in our lives.

How do we celebrate the gift of the Spirit in Christian worship? There were two services at the conference that exemplified this theological theme. The first was a lakeside liturgy of baptismal reaffirmation, featuring a sermon by Dr. Eunjoo Kim on the baptism of Jesus by John in Matthew 3:13-17. The reaffirmation of baptism and the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper followed, led by Dr. Deok-Weon Ahn and Rev. Charles Ryu. Characteristic of life in the Spirit, there was a certain “breezy” freedom, a profound sense of playfulness in this outdoor service. When Rev. Ryu lifted the bread and cup, the sunlight seemed to break through the clouds like the heavenly dove in the gospel lesson. Approaching the table at the water’s edge, we had to step over the place where the children had been digging in the sand; there were several small font-like holes in the ground, deep enough that they had filled with water.

The evening prayer service, which focused explicitly on “The Gift of the Spirit,” was designed by conference participants and consisted of three parts. During the first, Rev. Seung Nam Kim again employed the Korean folk storytelling style to narrate the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2). It was a fiery and lively presentation, seasoned with humor and punctuated with percussion. In the second part we sat around the branches of a tree, outlined in cloth on the floor. After hearing the story of Jesus’ baptism, children brought each worshiper a small white cloth that was dripping with cool water, having been dipped into the font. The final part of the

service was a powerful experience of mystical union in Christ. We stood in a circle, with many lifting their hands in a prayerful gesture, singing for the gift of the Spirit in improvised harmony.

4. *Incorporation into the Body of Christ.*

A young woman is reading her Bible on the train, as she crosses the Han River on the Dongsan Railway Bridge in the city of Seoul, Korea. “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:12-13). Although I’ve never met this woman, she is my sister—my sister in Christ. Paul’s letter reminds us that, through our baptism, we are members of one family in Christ’s body.

The Christian life is a life in community. Through our baptism, we become one with believers of every time and place. This is a unity that transcends all the things that seem to divide us—national borders, denominational structures, political debates, worship styles, generation gaps, differences of gender, language, culture As Paul said, there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ (Romans 8:35-39). In Christ’s body we are reconciled to God and to one another.

Baptism is not only the sacrament of unity; it is the sacrament of equality.² In baptism, all status, power, and privilege are erased, washed away in the water of the font. That’s why we call each other sister and brother; through our baptism, all Christians are on a first name basis. Unfortunately, we don’t always live up to the reality of our unity and equality in Christ. When we exclude certain members of the body, failing to show them the honor that we would show to Christ, or when we allow Christ’s church to be needlessly divided, we deny the gift of our baptism and dishonor the giver, Christ Jesus.

We are one body; but that doesn’t mean we’re all the same. The metaphor of the body allows for unity *and* diversity. The body is made up of many different members, each with different gifts, working in harmony for the good of all. This is the way God created us, and this is how God calls us to live: working in harmony toward a common purpose in Christ, bringing our different gifts together for a common goal. The diversity of the body of Christ is not only acceptable—it is essential for the life of the church!

Three issues in particular are worth noting. First, *language*. Christians around the world speak in a vast array of languages. This is a beautiful gift, even though it sometimes frustrates our communication. There is a sense however, in which all Christians share a common language, through the sacred stories of scripture, and in the central symbols of our faith: the cross, the book, the font, and the table. In baptism, we claim these stories and symbols—celebrating the common language of our faith.

Second, *culture*. The Presbyterian *Book of Order* says that the “water used for baptism should be common to the location” (W-3.3605). We should use “local water.” In part, this directive is intended to discourage superstitions about “holy water” imported from some special place. But this statement from the *Book of Order* also reminds us that our expressions of worship must be rooted in our native soil, and watered by our local rivers—in other words, authentic and true to our cultural contexts. There is only one baptism in Jesus Christ, but the grace of God flows through all the rivers of the world.

Third, *generations*. Every baptism is an intergenerational event, in the sense that, whether we are baptized as infants or adults, there is only one baptism. Furthermore, each time we welcome a new member to the body of Christ, the whole community of faith reaffirms the covenant of baptism. We all become like newborns in the sacrament of baptism, delivered to new life as we pass through waters of the font; at the same time, we honor those who have come before us, affirming the ancient traditions of our faith.

The best way to celebrate our unity and diversity in the body of Christ is through the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, which is the regular renewal and reaffirmation of the baptismal covenant. When we gather at the Lord’s Table, we rub elbows with all the members of the body—women and men, young and old, rich and poor, friends and strangers, east and west, north and south. The more we practice this common meal, the better the body of Christ will be built up in its spiritual unity and harmonious diversity.

We had a taste of that unity and diversity in the opening service of the conference, a traditional Protestant liturgy in the Korean-American style. The theme was “Incorporation into the Body of Christ.” Fittingly, it included the baptism of the infant son of one of the conference participants! Dr. Eunjoo Kim’s sermon, “The Freedom Children,” focused on Galatians 3:26-28, believed to be one of the church’s earliest baptismal formulas. Dr. Kim explained that the

Christian church, as the community of the baptized, is liberated from divisions of race, class, and gender. She particularly challenged Korean-American churches to be more accepting of the gifts of women in ministry. The service continued with the baptism and the Lord's Supper, with Dr. Paul Huh as presider. Worshipers touched the water of the font after receiving the bread and juice, remembering their own baptism.

The three-dimensional banner designed for this service by conference visual artist Bonjeong Koo was itself a striking symbol of unity and diversity. It consisted of several dozen cardboard boxes of various shapes, sizes, and colors, painted by children. Stacked up against the front wall of the worship space, they became the backdrop for a projected movie clip of a waterfall. These variegated boxes evoked the beautiful diversity of the members of Christ's body, all bathed in the water of God's grace.

5. *Sign of the Kingdom.*

There is another river that can't be found on any map, seen only in the dreams of prophets and the visions of saints. It flows from the temple of God in the new Jerusalem. And wherever the river goes, there is *life*. Not just common life, ordinary life, everyday life. This is *resurrection* life! There John of Patmos heard a voice from the throne, saying, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life" (Revelation 21:6).

In the sacrament of baptism, past, present, and future meet, swirling around together in the water of the font. Each baptism takes place in the present tense. And yet the implications of our baptisms ripple outward in time: into the past, connecting us in covenant relationship with generations upon generations of the people of God; and into the future, as we hope and pray for the coming of Christ's realm of justice and peace.

Therefore, baptism is also a sign of the kingdom of God. It is as though at every baptism we issued each new Christian a passport for a country that does not yet exist, at least not as it will in the fullness of time. For in the water of the font, we can see a glimpse of the new creation—when the hungry will be filled with good things and the thirsty will drink from the spring of the water of life; when the broken will be made whole and the outcasts will be welcomed in; when the captives will be released and the oppressed will live in freedom and

dignity; when wars will end, and we will live in peace with the whole creation; when *death* itself will be no more, and God will dry all our tears.

The Christian life is a life in anticipation of the life of the world to come, and Christian worship must reflect our eschatological hope, our hope in God's glorious future. We can give vision and voice to that hope by continuing to dream with the prophets of a world with justice and peace, to sing with the psalmists of God's redeeming power and love, to work with the apostles to spread the good news of the gospel, and to pray with the saints for the coming of Christ's realm.

The theme of the closing service at the conference was the "Sign of the Kingdom." The worship space was an L-shaped room, divided by a curtain into sections for men, women, and children, reminiscent of early Korean house churches. As the service began, the children made cacophonous hammering and sawing noises—sounds of deconstruction? From the other side of the wall, a woman's voice began to lead the haunting Korean lament, "O-So-So," a prayer for Christian unity. Soon, the children began to dismantle the wall, and the lament turned into the joyous spiritual "Amen, Amen." Through the broken wall, children, men, and women streamed together, singing and dancing—a sign of the promised reconciliation in Christ's realm.

After the sermon, an intergenerational dialogue, we made our way to the banquet hall for the heavenly feast. On the way we had to pass through a low archway made of balloons. Adults had to crouch down or even crawl—a reminder that one must become like a child to enter the realm of God (Mark 10:15). Then it was time to celebrate the meal of the kingdom. We sang the eucharistic prayer, using a beautiful Korean metrical setting. We also sang a West Indian setting of the Lord's Prayer, with the children leading the response: "hallowed be thy name." Assisted by elders, children served the bread and juice to their parents and to other adults, again calling to mind Jesus' words: "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4). The service ended with the children's choir singing a jazzy version of "This Little Light of Mine," joined by Korean drums and gongs as we marched outside.

Little Fish in the River of Life.

In his third-century treatise *On Baptism*, Tertullian wrote, "We, little fishes, after the

example of our *ichthys* Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor have we safety in any other way than by permanently abiding in water.”³ We Christians live our whole lives swimming in the water of our baptism—the river of God’s life-giving love, flowing from the well-spring of creation to the ocean of everlasting life. This is where our faith is born, where we live and move and have our being, our eternal home.

Whoever we are, wherever we come from, we are little fish in the river of God’s love. Christ invites us to swim with him, to delve ever deeper into the mystery of God. Christ calls us to swim forth in faith, sharing life-giving water with a thirsty world. May we continue to follow him, wherever this river of life will lead us, trusting in the grace of Christ, living in the love of God, and abiding in the communion of the Holy Spirit.

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Abstract

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The sacrament of baptism is the font source of Christian life. The theological themes of baptism, rooted in the stories and images of scripture, define the shape and substance of that life. Through baptism, we participate in the mystery of faith: Christ's saving death and life-giving resurrection. Washed in the water of the font, we are cleansed of sin and converted to a new way of life. We receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, in whom we are adopted as children of God and empowered to live faithfully. Incorporated into the body of Christ, we become members of a new community marked by spiritual unity and harmonious diversity. Baptism is also a sign of the coming realm of God: a new creation of justice and peace. The author draws on liturgical experiences at the 2008 Korean Worship and Music conference to illustrate each of these theological and biblical themes.

* Key words:

baptism, eucharist, worship, culture, discipleship

¹ *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982) 2-3.

² James White, *Sacraments as God's Self Giving* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 113.

³ Quoted in Maxwell Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation: Their Evolution and Interpretation* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1999) 61.