

Baptism – Inaugural Spirituality

Part III: Peter’s Baptismal Ethics and Luke’s Description of Early Church Preaching and Practice About Baptism

(1 Peter and Acts)

“Baptismal spirituality is to always live in the pattern of Jesus’ death and resurrection.”

(R. Weber)

In the middle of the 20th century several major publications argued that Peter’s first letter was built upon a "baptismal homily" or mirrored in essence the baptismal catechism of the first century church. Peter’s frequent use of birth imagery and specifically in conjunction with the specific discussion about baptism in 3:20ff, the constant emphasis upon imitating Jesus, and the strong ethical bent in this letter contributed to this hypothesis. While this hypothesis has not carried the day in Petrine Studies, it certainly serves notice that we should read both of his epistles with a careful eye to the potential baptismal setting of much of the teaching.

We normally do not consider 1 Peter a major text in regards to baptism. Yet we have the clearest definition of baptism expressed in 1 Peter 3:21 – “not the washing of the flesh’s filth, but the pledge of a good conscience towards God through the resurrection of Jesus Messiah.” The fact that this definition occurs in an extremely difficult passage in the New Testament probably contributes to its infrequent use today in baptismal teaching.

The definition occurs in a context where Peter is affirming that followers of Jesus have no need to fear Satan himself, if they are pursuing the good. As his quotation from Psalm 34 indicates, “the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous and his ears [open] to their prayers” (1 Peter 3:12). He confirms the believer’s confidence by referring to Jesus’ experience, when he suffered death in his obedience to God. It seemed that evil had conquered him. Yet, he was made alive and more, his triumph was proclaimed to the imprisoned spirits, showing that “angels, authorities and powers were under his authority” (3:22). The believer’s experience in baptism assures him that he is safe, just as God preserved Noah through the flood by providing the ark. So even though "fiery trials" await and "Satan like a roaring lion" seeks to devour believers, they do not need to fear because God, "the faithful creator" will keep them strong and is preserving their inheritance in heaven (1:4-5). Nothing can rob them of their inheritance "guarded in heaven and ready to be revealed." It is in this emphatic, eschatological context that Peter references the baptismal ritual to encourage believers to persevere, remain confident, and find comfort in their divine family connection.

For Peter the baptism experience becomes a marker, a sign of commitment. On the one hand the believer “makes the pledge of a good conscience towards God.” The word translated “pledge” (ἐπερώτημα *eperōtēma*) only occurs here in the New Testament. External to the New Testament it carries the idea of “question” or “inquiry.” It can also define the decree or decision of an authorized body. Usage in Greek papyri shows that it can signify “a stipulation often of a contractual nature.”¹ The cognate verb in the passive form means in the papyri contemporary with the New Testament “the terms one has been asked to agree with in a contract.”

The verb occurs more frequently in the New Testament with the sense of ask a question or make a request, and some interpreters consider the meaning of the noun here to be “request” or “plea”. However, the cognate verb used in the NT never means to pray in the NT. Someone “asks a question” (Mark 9:32) or “requests someone for something” (Matt. 16:1) or “inquires concerning God’s will or purpose” (Rom. 10:20). This encourages some within the paedobaptist tradition to see the baptism of the infant as “this request or petition” made by parents and other believers that God would at some point through his grace produce within that infant's life “a good conscience.” But the lack of occurrences of the verb to mean prayer and the lack of any other description in the NT of baptism as supplication to God would suggest another meaning is intended.

The connection of this terminology in the papyri with contractual language points to a meaning of pledge as Peter's intended meaning here. “Pledge” would mean that in baptism people are committing themselves to support the terms of the agreement that God has made. There is a strong sense of commitment implied.²

Peter links this with the phrase “good conscience.” This noun has the sense of shared knowledge and thus “awareness” or “consciousness” of something. Twice Peter used this term (2:19; 3:16) to indicate a person's consciousness or awareness of God and then behaviour that arises because of this consciousness. There is no sense of the “psycho-moral state”, i.e. conscience, but rather the commitment to “activity pleasing to God.” Achtemeier suggests that it is “a consciousness of what God wants that will lead one to do it.”³

When linked with the term “pledge” in a genitive construction, the question must be asked whether the relationship is subjective (what this consciousness or awareness “pledges”) or

¹ Paul Achtemeier, *1 Peter. Hermeneia* (Minn.: Fortress Press, 1996):270.

² In the early church baptism came to be called a “sacramentum”. This term described the oath of loyalty that a Roman soldier made to the Roman emperor when he formally became a legionnaire. The Vulgate translates this Greek term in 1 Peter 3:21 as “interrogation”, i.e. question, examination, testing. This would also resemble the oath taken by a person entering the Essene community, who commit themselves to the Law of Moses and God’s will (cf. 1 QS V 8-10; CD XV 6-11).

³ Achtemeier, 270.

objective (the pledge to maintain this consciousness and all it entails). The subjective option intimates that the good consciousness that offers the pledge precedes the baptismal experience, rather than arises from it. Achtemeier opts for the objective sense, suggesting that “baptism consists in pledging to maintain the consciousness of God and the ensuing appropriate acts that are made possible through the resurrection of Christ” and to do this in the midst of a hostile, evil world.⁴ Just as Noah kept his commitment to God, built the ark and was preserved, so too the believer, using the power of the Messiah’s resurrection, can keep her commitment to God, pledged in the baptismal ritual.

Although Peter introduces the analogy with Noah’s rescue by God through the flood, he is quick to clarify that the salvation we express through our baptism is in fact dependent upon the resurrection of the Messiah, not the result of our participation in a ritual. This is not to diminish the significance of the ritual, but to clarify its importance and its true function. To this end he contrasts it with Jewish purification rituals denying that baptism is merely the “washing of the flesh’s filth.” Rather it has an inherent moral and spiritual function, related to a believer’s linkage with God’s purposes and the ethical commitment to "be good and holy."

Peter certainly links the baptismal experience with the believer’s continued and real struggle with evil. In 2:11-12 Peter reminded his audience that they engaged in strategic warfare with “fleshly passions” that combat the "soul", i.e. the very essence of the person. This warfare arises because of the believer’s new status in Christ as “sojourners and resident aliens,” people who are present in this evil age, but not possessing citizen rights within it. This makes them the object of great suspicion, hostility, and attack, resulting in mortal effects in some cases. The baptismal ritual and all that it entails marks their point of transition from dependence upon the ignorant human traditions their ancestors believed, to truth and hope as it is in Jesus, the Messiah. Suffering is an expected part of their new status.

What then in summary is Peter’s essential baptismal theology? How does baptism support and nurture the believer’s spiritual experience?

- He links baptism with the resurrection of Jesus, just as Paul does.
- He contrasts baptism with Jewish purification rituals, showing how and why it is different.
- The spiritual experience of baptism should serve notice to the believer that he has entered into a new family, a new culture, a new kingdom through a new birth.

⁴ Achtemeier, 272.

This entails new behavior and new struggles. Perhaps the baptismal ritual gives expression to this birthing process.

- Peter emphasizes that evil is real and the believer engages in continued struggle with it. The baptismal ritual marks the believer's warfare with evil in a new and elevated sense. He becomes a particular target for evil, but also becomes a weapon against evil.
- The fear that normally arises because of these encounters with evil are assuaged by the new hope the believer possesses through baptism. He is in a new relationship with God and he already possesses salvation.
- He notes the hope that baptism proves that God will save the believer, just as God saved Noah and his family through the judgment of the flood.
- The believer has made a commitment to God through baptism to behave in ways compatible with his new family and his new father.

As we reflect upon Peter's letter, in what ways does Peter, as an elder, use the baptismal experience to foster the spiritual formation of believers under his care?

- Baptism marks the transition of a person into a new spiritual zone – the life of a chosen, resident alien (1 Peter 1:1).
- Believer's live under God's protection, but this does not isolate them from suffering. Rather it guarantees confidence that God will help them through it and nothing that happens will jeopardize their relationship with him.
- Baptism should provide confidence that believers can access God's power displayed in Christ's resurrection.
- The personal nature of this transition is emphasized – they personally make this pledge to God and they now carry a personal responsibility to act upon this pledge. They have accepted the terms that God has set for this relationship and gladly embrace them.

How does Peter's use of baptism in spiritual direction inform the potential we have to use it to encourage the spiritual formation of believers' today? Peter's baptismal theology helps believers:

- to cope with the reality and problem of evil – the aspect of theodicy;
- to link Jesus' victory over evil with our own;
- to act with ethical responsibility and pursue holiness – a mandate that seems to be minimized today;

- to apply spiritual principles to all aspects of life – baptism enrolls the entire person in God’s agenda;
- to acknowledge that Jesus Christ is now the believer's "patron. " Peter’s use of contractual language suggests similarities with the patron-client relationship that dominated Hellenistic civic and economic life.

Luke’s Narrative in Acts

We catch glimpses of religious life in the early church in the narrative that Luke wrote and which we call “Acts.” He talks about baptism in two ways. In some cases he describes actual cases of baptisms and in other cases he reports speeches in which early church leaders talk about baptism.

The stories of baptisms are sometimes general and collective. For example, following Peter’s Pentecost sermon Luke tells us that about 3000 people repented and were baptized in Jerusalem.⁵ In the context this action signaled repentance, forgiveness and reception of the Spirit and resulted in these people “being added to the ‘church.’” A similar response occurred in Samaria when Philip proclaimed the Gospel and many responded by being baptized.⁶ In this case the Spirit does become evident until after the baptism, as God’s means to validate for leaders from the Jerusalem church the inclusion of Samaritans in the Messiah’s assembly.

Luke also shares the stories of the Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius, Paul, Lydia, the Philippian Jailer, Crispus and others at Corinth, and some disciples of John at Ephesus. In each case Luke is careful to note that faith in Jesus Christ preceded the act of baptism. In one case the Baptism of John was not deemed sufficient and people were the baptized in the name of Jesus.⁷ In some cases “whole households” confessed faith in Jesus and were baptized. Luke is silent as to whom this included, but we might surmise the children who could express faith and the household servants.

Luke also has key leaders include baptism in their evangelistic preaching. Peter, Phillip, Paul all do this.⁸ Because people such as Lydia, the Phillipian jailor, and Crispus were all baptized in response to Paul’s preaching, we can presume that the presentation, as in Acts 13, included discussion about baptism. In one of his defense speeches Paul reports how Ananias, after Jesus has appeared to Paul on the Damascus Road, commands him “be baptized and wash away your

⁵ Acts 2:38,41.

⁶ Acts 8:12-16.

⁷ Acts 19:1-6.

⁸ Peter (Acts 2, 10, 11); Phillip (Acts 8) Paul (Acts 13)

sins, calling on the name his name.”⁹ Paul did this. The way Ananias links baptism with purification from sin and appeal to God for mercy indicates to us how Jewish Christians were interpreting and understanding the significance of baptism.

In these accounts and speeches Luke enables us to see how significantly baptism is woven into the experience of the early church. No significance advance of the Gospel to new people groups occurs without baptism being prominent. Jew, Samaritan, Gentile – each one is baptized as the point of entry into the Messiah’s assembly. Paul himself is baptized as part of his conversion story and he marks this as a special spiritual event. Attachment to a local house church is the usual outcome. The supply of water never seems to be an issue. In Judea and Jerusalem there existed many *miqwoth* which could be used. Sometimes natural bodies of water were used. While the mode is never described explicitly, we have no reason to think that it differed from normal Jewish practices of purification by water. Given the commitment of the whole person to follow Jesus, the immersion of the whole person in water would be a natural expression of this reality, which Paul seems to presume in his discussion in Romans 6 as he used the burial imagery.

How do these stories and sermons help us today to appreciate the significance of baptism for Christian spirituality?

1. It is the expected response of faith in Jesus Christ on the part of every new believer. There do not seem to be any exceptions.
2. It is done upon profession of faith in Jesus Christ, with little or no delay. Discipling follows baptism as people then move into living their new faith journey with Jesus.
3. Through baptism people enter into the Messiah’s body, i.e. the church. Baptism becomes the means of identification with the Messiah’s people. Presumably baptism marked membership in the community, whatever that entailed.
4. Baptism seems to be done by the one who presents the Gospel.
5. Repentance, purification from sin, forgiveness, presence of the Holy Spirit are all associated with baptism.
6. Baptism is “into” or “in” the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁰ This seems to signify immersion into the sphere of Jesus’ authority and thereby association with him.

⁹ Acts 22:16.

¹⁰ Luke used various prepositions to define this phrase. ἐπί (2:38); εἰς (8:16; 19:5); ἐν(10:48).

7. Part III: Baptism: Drama, Grace and Inaugural Spirituality

Peter's Baptismal Ethics and Luke's Narratives in Acts

A. Introduction

1. In mid-20th Century some scholars argued that the letter of 1 Peter was based on a sermon preached at a baptismal service or was structured around a baptismal catechism. This position is not held by many today, but the contents of 1 Peter certainly reflect many baptismal themes:
 - a. birth imagery
 - b. emphasis upon imitating Jesus
 - c. strong ethical focus
 - d. significant reflection on the meaning of suffering
2. Explicit definition of Christian baptism in 1 Peter 3:21

B. 1 Peter 3:21 – Context

1. Christians have no need to fear Satan (3:12-14)
2. Jesus experienced suffering and death, but was raised from the dead (3:17-18)
3. All “angels, authorities and powers are under his [Jesus’] authority” (3:22)
4. Just as God preserved Noah through the flood, so God preserves believers even through “fiery trials” (4:12)

C. 1 Peter 3:21 – Baptism as a sign or pledge of commitment to God

1. Several key questions in this passage
2. What is the meaning of the phrase συνειδήσεως ἀγαθῆς ἐπερώτημα εἰς θεόν – “pledge? of a good conscience towards God”?
 - a. only occurrence of ἐπερώτημα in the NT
 - b. in papyri contemporary with NT it signifies a “stipulation often of a contractual nature, pledge.”
 - c. the corresponding verb means to request or make a plea, but in the NT it never means to pray. It signifies to make an inquiry, ask a question.
 - d. so this does not signify a prayer made to God for a good conscience. Rather it means that the person in his or her baptism is pledging to God something that arises from a good conscience or awareness (subjective genitive) or something that the person will do as a result of the pledge, i.e. maintain a good awareness towards God (objective genitive) and thus behave in a holy manner.
 - e. probably the objective genitive fits most adequately with the parallel to Noah, who kept his commitment to God, built the ark and was preserved.

D. 1 Peter 3:21 – Salvation based upon the resurrection of Jesus, not our Baptism

1. According to Peter baptism is not merely a purificatory ritual, i.e. “the washing of the flesh’s filth.”
2. Baptism “saves” because it reflects the person’s faith commitment in “the resurrection of Jesus Messiah.”
3. This salvation is secure because Jesus Messiah is now at the “right hand of God”, the place of ultimate authority (3:22).

E. 1 Peter 3:21 – The moral dimension of Baptism

1. Through baptism the person gives God first place.
2. Consider 2:11-12 and its expression of the reality of the spiritual and moral struggle the believer engages.
3. Baptism marks this point of transition, as God locates the believer in his family.

F. Summary – Peter’s Baptismal Theology

1. Baptism indicates a person’s involvement in the resurrection of Jesus.
2. He contrasts baptism with Jewish purificatory rituals.
3. Baptism serves notice that the believer has entered into a new family, a new culture, with new behaviour and ethical struggles.
4. Evil is real and baptism marks a person’s placement under God’s might hand.
5. Baptism signals hope in God’s preservation when judgment comes.
6. Baptism expresses the believer’s commitment to God of faith and loyal obedience.
7. Just as God "saved" Noah through the waters of the flood, but this was dependent upon his prior obedience to God's commands, so too baptism is the water that "saves" a believer in this limited sense (i.e. demonstrates God's provision for salvation), but depends upon a prior commitment in faith to Jesus Christ.

G. Using Peter’s Baptismal Theology for Spiritual Guidance

1. The nature of discipleship:
 - a. transition into God’s family – new status as “chosen, resident alien;”
 - b. believers live under God’s protection, but still struggle with evil;
 - c. believers can access God’s power displayed in Jesus’ resurrection;
 - d. a personal pledge to God to live loyally and obediently.
2. Coping with the reality of evil.
3. The shape of pastoral ministry.

Luke’s Narratives in Acts

A.Events

1. General groups who respond to the Gospel are baptized – Jews in Jerusalem, Samaritans in Samaria.
2. Individuals are baptized as they put faith in Jesus – Ethiopian eunuch, Cornelius, Paul, Lydia, Philippian Jailor, Crispus. Often others associated with them were saved and baptized at the same time.

B.Speeches

1. Peter at Pentecost, Philip at Samaria, Peter to Cornelius, Paul to the Jews in Pisidia Antioch.
2. Because individuals respond to Paul’s presentations of the Gospel by being baptized, we can presume that he talked about it in his evangelism.
3. In one of his defense speeches Paul describes how Ananias commanded him to be baptized.

C.Summary

1. Every advance of the Gospel transculturally is marked by baptism.
2. Every believer receives baptism upon profession of faith. John’s disciples are baptized in the name of Jesus even though they have already experienced John’s baptism.
3. Profession of faith and baptism are all linked together in relatively short spaces of time.
4. Inclusion in the Messiah’s assembly is the expected outcome, marked by attachment to the local house church.
5. While Luke never explicitly defines the mode, what information is presented seems to cohere with immersion or plunging

D.Implications

1. It is the expected response of faith in Jesus Christ on the part of every new believer. There do not seem to be any exceptions.
2. It is done upon profession of faith in Jesus Christ, with little or no delay. Discipling follows baptism as people then move into living their new faith journey with Jesus.

3. Through baptism people enter into the Messiah's body, i.e. the church. Baptism becomes the means of identification with the Messiah's people. Presumably baptism marked membership in the community, whatever that entailed.
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