

Unity in Christ: One Faith, One Baptism and the Eucharistic Koinonia

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'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.' (Eph 4: 4-6)

The Eucharistic community is a paradoxical 'many' who have become 'one'. Initiation into this community, this unity, is spoken of in the NT, appropriately, in many ways that nevertheless have unifying theological themes and convictions. Baptism is always understood within a trinitarian perspective: the declaration of the Father, the human experience of the Son, and the gift of the abiding Spirit.

1. Declaration of the Father: Adoption into the Household of God

1.1 *The extension of Israel's salvation history*

The basis for baptism lies in God's one saving history. Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist (an Elijah figure: cf Mk 9:11-13) in the river Jordan (cf the cleansing of Naaman, 2 Kgs 5) points symbolically to the saving history of Israel, God's people, recipients of divine mercy, covenant and election. Paul's letter to the Ephesians insists that baptism extends that salvation history to all who believe. Those who were once 'strangers to the covenants of promise' (Eph 2: 12), 'far off', (2: 13) and 'strangers and aliens' (2:19) are now brought near, 'citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God' (2:19). This discussion of the membership of the 'household of God' addresses a long-standing and hotly debated theme, namely membership of the worshipping community. The legal codes show differences (compare Exod 23: 17, Lev 23: 1-33 and Deut 16: 11, 14), but mostly imply a different status for the *ger* ('alien') and exclude the *nokri* ('foreigner'). Ezra/Nehemiah draw tight ethnic boundaries around the 'holy seed' (Ezra 9:2), whereas Isaiah 56:3, 6 insists that the 'foreigner' can be 'joined to the Lord'.

Baptism provides an entry into God's community that breaks down ethnic or any other boundaries, understanding God's creative activity as the basis for this unity (cf 1 Cor 8:

6: 'one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.'). Baptism is the only effective initiation rite that includes all in the sacred story of Abraham. Galatians makes this clear, stating that baptism into Christ breaks down the boundaries drawn along lines of race, social status and gender (Gal 3: 28). These, or any other, categories no longer have salvific significance (hence circumcision is no longer a suitable initiation rite).

1.2 God's sovereign rule

The baptized community participates in the sovereign rule of God. The fourth Gospel uses the term 'kingdom of God' only in the Nicodemus discourse (John 3: 3, 5), adapting earlier Jewish eschatological ideas that spoke of participation in the sovereignty of God in terms of cleansing and recreation of individuals, nations and creation itself. (Cf Ezek 36:25-27: 'I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you... And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in all my statutes.')

God's kingdom is made accessible through God's action alone, as God graciously exercises power to save humankind. This is clearly to be interpreted in light of Christology in John 3; life in the kingdom is for those who believe in the Christ-Redeemer.

2. The Human Experience of the Son

'The fundamental figure of grace is Jesus Christ himself, and all sacramental forms are grounded in his form in a most concrete sense. The ecclesial and social shape that the form of the sacraments comes to have can only occur by constant reference to Christ, the fundamental form.' (von Balthasar: 1992, 576)

Baptism is Christological. It is intimately linked to Jesus' own experience: his embrace of our humanity in flesh, his baptism, and his death and resurrection. Two aspects of Jesus' experience particularly provide a basis for Christian baptism.

2.1 Jesus' Baptism

Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist indicates that baptism is into the life of the Trinity, and into the life of the community as the continuing Body of Christ. The Synoptics underline the trinitarian framework of Jesus' baptism. The Spirit descends as a dove, and the voice of the Father acclaims Jesus as the 'beloved Son' (Mark 1:9-11 & parallels). The fourth Gospel emphasises the abiding of the Spirit, and declares that Jesus is the Son of God (John 1: 32-34).

Conversion (*metanoia*), forgiveness of sins, and cleansing are associated with John the Baptist's baptism, especially in the Synoptics. The idea of ritual cleansings in water has a long history in Israelite and Jewish practice. While noting this prehistory, it is more important to note the new aspect found in the baptism of Jesus. John expresses this in terms of Jesus as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'. Jesus is the One whose actions have transforming implications for the many (who is given by the Father because God so loved 'the world', the bread of heaven that 'gives life to the world', etc.).

In all four Gospels, Jesus' baptism is closely followed by the calling of the first disciples. There is a direct link between Jesus' baptism and the beginning of the Christian community.

2.2. Jesus' death and resurrection

Baptism is not only incorporation into Jesus' baptism, but also into his death and resurrection. This is set out particularly in Paul's theology, most fully in Romans 6. The use of *homoioima* in 6:5 ('a death *like* his', or 'the *likeness* of his death') indicates a similarity of form between baptism and Jesus' death, wherein immersion in water is more than a moral dying with Christ; rather, the death of Christ is actualised in the sacrament of baptism. The baptized are thus 'dead to sin, and alive to God in Jesus Christ' (6:11). Elsewhere in Paul's writings, Christian death with Christ and new life with him are not connected to baptism (eg. Rom 7:4; 2 Cor 5: 14f; Gal 2: 19f). It appears that, for Paul, baptism does not actually effect this death, but attests to the relationship already established. It is the outward sign and seal of the human decision of faith that responds to God's gracious act in Christ, and claims it as applicable for each faithful individual.

Paul's language of new life in baptism, 'dying to sin', is often that of divesting like a soiled garment, or of putting to death (imagery probably drawn from the gentile *toga virilis* ritual). It is a renunciation of the old, idolized self. It is also resurrection, walking 'in newness of life' (Rom 6:4). Col 3: 12 speaks in terms of 'putting on' fresh clothing ('...a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, long-suffering'). In other words, in dying to the old self, the baptized person continues to be conformed to Christ in concrete daily living (hence the verb 'walk').

3. The Gift of the Abiding Spirit

Much scholarly discussion has centred around the relationship between water-baptism and Spirit-baptism. Careful reading of the NT indicates that this is a false distinction. There are different emphases between, for example the Fourth Gospel and Paul's letters, but there is unity in understanding baptism as inauguration into God's kingdom, which is evidenced by life in the Spirit. The main images of 'Spirit' in regards to baptism may be summarised as 'midwife' (that which aids birth into the new life of God's kingdom) and 'unifier' (that which signals and guarantees the unity of this new life).

3.1 The Spirit as 'midwife'

This image is found particularly in John 3, drawing on OT imagery (cf the Spirit that hovers over the waters at creation in Gen 1). The old age was entered by human birth, but the new is entered by faith and baptism, through the action of the Spirit. John 3 uses the imagery of birth to point to entry into the new life offered by Jesus. Being born 'from above' (John 3: 3) is paralleled with 'born of water and the Spirit' (3: 5) to indicate both the reality of human birth, and to depart from and transcend it. Water, the amniotic fluid of human birth, is now the means of initiation in which the purifying Spirit is imparted to the 'newborn' person, newly entered into God's *basileia*. There are a range of interpretations offered for the exact meaning of the phrase 'of water and the Spirit' (two contrasting elements, one physical and one spiritual; water and Spirit as one and the same

element; connection with rites of cleansing and initiation, etc). What seems clear in this passage is the link between water as a symbol of birth, and the Spirit, who makes entry into God's *basileia* possible.

3.2 The Spirit as unifier

The old life, pre-baptism, is characterised by division, hostility, segregation of humanity into categories, and life under the 'law'. The new age is characterised by the Spirit, bringing freedom and hope, reconciliation and a covenant 'written on the heart' (Jer 31: 31-34). Baptism into Christ is baptism into the life of the Spirit. It is the Spirit that guarantees the unity of the baptismal community: 'In one Spirit we were all baptized into one Body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of [saturated by] one Spirit' (1 Cor 12:13).

4. Unity in Christ: Implications for the Eucharistic Koinonia

To be baptized, in the New Testament, is to undergo a transforming entry into Jesus' divine humanity. Diverse people are unified in Jesus' life and ministry, and in his death and resurrection. It is based on God's prevenient grace in entering fully into our humaity so that we 'may become participants of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1: 4). It is a cleansing, a putting away of the old nature. More importantly, though, it is a continued dying and rising that leads the baptized one daily into the transfiguring experience of the incarnate Christ. Christ's gathering in his own person of humanity and divinity is the beginning of the radical breaking down of barriers that characterises the community of the baptized. Many become one. The dismembered are re-membered in the body of Christ. The life of the body of Christ is a life 'worthy of the calling to which you have been called', focused on maintaining the bond of peace in the unity of the Spirit (Eph 4:1-3).

While baptism is an individual 'event', the individual's 'inauguration into the sacred story of the Christ-event' (Carlson: 1993, 259), it is also a unifying event where those of diverse backgrounds are incorporated into the one body of Christ, through the work of the one Spirit. Paul argues in 1 Cor 1: 10-17 against claims of 'belonging' to various human

leaders. He sees these claims as coming dangerously close to fracturing the unity of the body of Christ. The community of the baptized, because it is the body of the one Christ, is characterized by peace and reconciliation. Eph 2: 11-22 emphasises this, being an extended discussion of the difference between ‘were once’ and ‘but now’. Those who were once divided, hostile, far off (presumably from each other, as well as from God’s salvation story) are now made into one united body, in the peace that is Christ, one new humanity, joined together, built together into a suitable ‘dwelling place for God’ (2:22).

The unifying theme of the OT is the call to Israel to live according to the character of God: in holiness, righteousness and justice, in the bonds of loyal love (*hesed*). The NT teachings on baptism take this basic principle, and extend it to the Church, the baptized community, in terms of living a new life that characterises God’s basileia. Eph 4:1-6 summarises the characteristics of this new life, focusing on unity and peace as the ultimate gifts of the Spirit. Thus, among the many emphases in NT teachings on baptism, there is an overarching unity: ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all.’

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