

One Baptism

A Word to the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in West Virginia

A member of the congregation of Parkersburg First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) who was baptized as an infant has requested to be immersed. Her desire has arisen from having watched others being immersed and having seen in that act a significant demonstration of the many gifts that Christ has for his disciples. While the prospect of an immersion would have once been received as an appropriate response throughout our churches (and still is in many congregations), new understandings cause many Disciples to pause in the face of such a request.

Following a series of conversations including the member, the local pastor and the regional pastor, the decision has been made to perform the immersion on Palm Sunday 2001, not as a rebaptism but as a remembrance and reaffirmation of the member's one baptism.

I shared the following thoughts with the Parkersburg congregation on that occasion and do so with you.

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. (Ephesians 4:4-6)

Disciples have generally affirmed that there is one baptism and have not observed the practice of re-baptism.

For several decades, the common approach among our people was that the sacrament¹ was valid only when administered to believers by total immersion in water. This position was based on the literal translation of the Greek verb βάπτισμα (baptizo) meaning to immerse, dip or wash.

The practice of considering other methods of baptism invalid - which had prevailed in our church from the immersion of the families of Thomas and Alexander Campbell in Buffalo Creek on June 12, 1812 - was from our early days questioned in some quarters (particularly by Barton W. Stone and members related to the "Christian Connection"). By 1920 there were congregations that were receiving into membership those who had been baptized in other traditions in infancy and without total immersion. This practice of "open membership" is now widespread among Disciples. At the same time there are many congregations that still require immersion for admission to the church.

¹ I use the term *sacrament* being fully cognizant of the conversations that have taken place around this word and concept among the Disciples over the years. I believe that converging understandings and common usage make it an appropriate part of our vocabulary today.

This has brought us to a time when the sacrament of baptism has become a point of confusion for many Disciples. This divine gift that has been a powerful witness in the whole church and a source of unity and purpose for Disciples of Christ from our earliest days has become, in some cases, a cause for bitterness and dissension. This is a sad commentary on a holy sign given to us to incorporate us into Christ's own saving work.

Among the reasons put forward for accepting the baptism of those who have not been immersed are these two:

- (1.) There is among Disciples a strong inclination to respect the convictions of individuals as regards their walk with God. If they believe they are baptized and profess their faith in the Lordship of Christ, then it is difficult to enforce a practice that they find contrary to their experience of faith. Requiring Christians, who believe they have been validly baptized in another church tradition, to undergo immersion, or else be excluded from membership, has become a source of distress for many Disciples, especially given our commitment to church unity and our disdain for "tests of faith" other than the good confession (Matthew 16:16).
- (2.) Our commitment to the concept, "That the Church of Christ upon earth is essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one;"² has led us to respect the validity of the ministries of the several denominations. Our respect for the integrity of all Christians and our commitment to the principle that there is room in the church for those who disagree leads us to hold in high regard the diverse sacramental practices which the church employs to convey the gifts of God to the people of God. Our generally held opinion, which is in accord with that of most churches, has been that baptism is essential for membership in the church and is not repeatable. We have not always been of one mind about what constitutes baptism but we have known that it is essential in the Christian life.³

Our journey in faith has brought us to a time when many Disciples are no longer willing to impose or even encourage immersion for those who have been previously baptized by another form in the church, believing that this is a violation of the principle of one baptism. And yet there are those who come to us desiring to reaffirm their baptismal vows, especially if these were made in their infancy by adult sponsors. Sometimes they desire a sacramental action - beyond words - to mark their reaffirmation of their faith. This may take the form of the affusion of water on the head or hands or perhaps an immersion in water to remember or reaffirm their baptism but not to repeat it.

In a time marked by contrasting opinions on the part of faithful and well-meaning Christians it is not appropriate to cast aspersions and condemnations but to seek to

² *Declaration and Address*, Thomas Campbell

³ Our own practice has been that following the confession by the baptismal candidate that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God," the candidate is immersed in water in the triune name of God, "the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."

understand the will of God and to benefit from the variety of opinions and practices that are in use.

This much is very clear: the church must not diminish the importance of the Sacrament of Holy Baptism. Christ gives it for the healing and edification of his church. It unites us with our Lord in his death and resurrection, it unites us with our sisters and brothers in the faith, and it cleanses us of our sin. It is not optional even though we may have differing opinions as to its meaning and method of administration.

Every one of us is called on to remember our baptism with great frequency. It is probably more correct for us to say “I am baptized” rather than “I was baptized” in recognition of the continual regeneration that God provides through our one baptism. We remember and reaffirm our baptism whenever we participate in the baptism of another, whenever we receive the Lord’s Supper, whenever we proclaim our faith that Jesus Christ is Lord and whenever else we have occasion to call to mind the saving acts of Christ. For some, this may lead to a return to the baptismal waters where they first received Christ as Lord and Savior, not to be rebaptized but to reaffirm their one baptism.

May God bless us and the whole church as we seek to be faithful to our calling and as we pursue our journey toward the unity for which Christ prays.

William Burwell Allen, Regional Minister
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in West Virginia
Passion (Palm) Sunday 2001