



Baptism—Plastic Flowers in the Holy Water

GEORGE M. BASS

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

The property of a defunct Roman Catholic minor seminary was purchased by a conservative Protestant college which had been uprooted from its downtown location by the building of a freeway. The new campus offered the school the opportunity to make a fresh start. The impressive buildings, bounded on three sides by two lakes, were remodeled and upgraded. Attention was given to architectural details, and care was exercised to keep the renovations in harmony with the character of the buildings. With one exception—the chapel—the effort was quite successful.

The chapel was a gem of Romanesque architecture, but it was decided to transform it into something of a New England “meetinghouse” with a choir located in the apse, a pulpit-table arrangement replacing the altar, and white pews with dark trim in the nave. Three structural details posed problems: the beautiful marble columns on either side of the nave, the Stations of the Cross, and the stoups for the holy water, which were imbedded in the masonry of the main entrance to the chapel. The columns were left untouched; nothing could be done to them. Lighting was installed over selected Stations of the Cross for a kind of “art gallery” effect. The problem of the stoups was solved by filling them with flowers—plastic flowers, at that—to dress up the entrance to the chapel. The river of life was, in a sense, dried up and filled in as the final step in converting a Roman Catholic chapel to a conservative Protestant posture.

The decision-makers of that college simply did what many Christians have been doing for countless years; they overlooked the theological profundities and pastoral implications of baptism as the first and principal sacrament of the church. Baptism has become a perfunctory rite for numerous church members;

*The title is based on the title of a book of ten sermons on baptism by the author, *Plastic Flowers in the Holy Water* (Lima: C.S.S. of Ohio, 1981). Fifteen baptismal sermons for Lent and Easter are included in Frederick W. Kemper and George M. Bass, *You Are My Beloved Children* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1981).

the Eucharist is the significant sacrament, especially with the contemporary emphasis on more frequent communion. Many main-line Protestant denominations have almost become one-sacrament churches. Controversies over “believer’s baptism” and “the baptism of the Holy Spirit” have done little to restore baptism to its rightful place in the lives of believers. The “plastic flowers” remain in the fonts, if not the stoups, of churches; biblical study and theological reflection are necessary to remove them and restore baptism to its proper place in the worship and daily lives of Christians.

Some of the liturgical churches have made a genuine attempt to restore baptism as the

primary sacrament of the church. For example, in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*, the optional “Brief Order for Confession and Forgiveness” contains this important, but often unnoticed, rubric: “1. The minister leads the congregation in the invocation. The sign of the cross may be made by all in remembrance of their Baptism.” That is one of the liturgical efforts to throw out the “plastic flowers in the holy water” by restoring a baptismal perspective to the eucharistic liturgy. Most of the revised services of worship are baptismally oriented as well as eucharistically ordered. Other attempts are being made to uncover the theological roots of holy baptism and communicate, through educational efforts, the fundamental importance of baptism for Christian faith and life. Preaching upon baptism will be needed, however, if these attempts are to be successful.

I. THE ROLE OF PREACHING IN THE RECOVERY OF BAPTISM

The congregation of which I am a member has a new baptismal banner. It says, “Child of God, you have been sealed with the Holy Spirit, and marked with the cross of Christ forever.” When someone is baptized, a smaller banner, with the name of the person to be baptized on it, can be placed upon the larger and permanent banner. Interestingly, this banner was not put on a staff or pole, but was placed on the pulpit, intentionally or unintentionally reminding the pastors of that parish, at least, to preach on baptism.

The majority of preachers in liturgical churches appear to be orienting their preaching ministries to the new lectionaries of the churches. Most of the published exegetical and sermonic helps are based upon the several lectionaries. Those who use these are engaged in liturgical preaching. Gradually preachers are discovering that liturgical preaching is not only biblically oriented; it is also sacramentally directed—at least in conjunction with the Eucharist. The church year is eschatological, as well as eucharistic, but it is also—at its very heart and center (the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ)—baptismal. Liturgical preaching must have a baptismal dimension to it to get rid of the “plastic flowers in the holy water.”

Martin Luther, by precept and example, offers homiletical direction to contemporary ministers of the Word. He understood that preaching, to qualify as genuine liturgical preaching, must be pastoral proclamation. It needs to be related to the lives of the people in a biblical, kerygmatic, and sacramental context if people are to respond thankfully to God’s gracious act in baptism, wage war against sin and Satan, and live out the gospel in their lives. For Luther, this meant that preaching on baptism was a regular part of his homiletical agenda.

He left at least 23 sermons on baptism, but—equally as important—his references to, and exposition of, baptism in numerous sermons offer a model for baptismal preaching. He preached about baptism because he wanted people to comprehend the meaning of baptism and the nature of the baptismal process—how water and the Word and the Holy Spirit combine to make baptism a sacrament. He insisted that baptismal preaching had to be biblical preaching, so that the people might understand the nature of the covenant God makes with his children in baptism. In a “Sermon at the Baptism of Bernhard von Anhalt” (1540), he declared: “First, we should learn from God’s Word in order that every Christian may know what baptism is.”¹ He goes on to say that “the sacrament of baptism has three parts” and proceeds to delineate these in sermon after sermon.

Luther's other main concern was that, through preaching, people could develop what Eugene Brand calls a "baptismal perspective" for their lives. Baptism is more than an initiation ceremony; it has life-long consequences. Baptism brings people into an enduring relationship with God, while the Eucharist renews the gifts given in baptism—forgiveness, reunion, regeneration, and hope—through a rhythm that operates in the lives of people from birth to death. Again, Luther writes: "Therefore this whole life is nothing else than a spiritual baptism which does not cease till death, and he who is baptized is condemned to die."² What is begun at the font is not concluded until a person dies and is placed in the tomb; therefore, it is not uncommon to find the same paschal candle, which stood by the font at baptism, standing by the casket of Christians at their funeral. That candle also symbolizes that "the lifting up out of the baptismal water is quickly done, but the thing it signifies—the spiritual birth and the increase of grace and righteousness—even though it begins in baptism, lasts until death, indeed, until the last day. Only then will that be finished which the lifting up out of baptism signifies."³

Brand also believes, with Luther and, before him, St. Paul that "the baptismal perspective does require a style of life that flows from our identity as family or people of God. We do what we do in faithful obedience to the parental voice and as part of the 'family business.'"⁴ That business is, according to Luther, "remembering to do to our neighbor what Christ has done for us." Christians will, therefore, be servants of their neighbors, caring for them, nurturing them, and protecting them out of Christian love. Such concern for others surely involves telling them the good news in Jesus Christ, as well as being involved in missionary activities all over the world.

It is Brand's opinion that "such a baptismal perspective can become operative in the life of the church without a constant harping on Baptism." The Eucharist, Scripture, and prayer "bind us with each other and all humanity... [and] concern for others does not stop at the front door."⁵ To be "marked with

¹Martin Luther, "Sermon at the Baptism of Bernhard von Anhalt," *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (55 vols.; Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis: Concordia, 1955-76) 51.320. Hereafter cited as *LW*.

²Martin Luther, "The Holy and Blessed Sacrament of Baptism," *LW* 35.30.

³*Ibid.*, 31.

⁴Eugene Brand, *Baptism: A Pastoral Perspective* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975) 120.

⁵*Ibid.*, 120-21.

the cross of Christ forever" means that we are God's children for time and eternity, but it also means that we are locked into a lifestyle of concern, service, and witness as long as we live here on earth. The dimensions of this baptismal perspective, Luther and others would suggest, need to be spelled out through the proclamation of the Word, just as surely as baptism needs to be announced to the people as a loving act of a gracious God. It is crucial that preachers should preach regularly on baptism; the question is how.

II. PREACHING BAPTISM TO THE PEOPLE

It is easier to identify occasions for preaching about baptism to congregations than it is to suggest how to avoid "harping upon baptism" in every sermon so that people will not react, "Oh, here he [or she] goes again—on Baptism." One clue is to approach the gospel—and, therefore,

baptism—as story. Again, Luther comes to the assistance of those who would preach the Word to the people:

Gospel is and should be nothing else than a discourse or story about Christ....Such a story can be told in various ways; one spins it out, and the other is brief. Thus the gospel is and should be nothing else than a chronicle, a story, a narrative about Christ, telling who he is, what he did, said, and suffered....The gospel is a story about Christ, God's and David's Son, who died and was raised and is established as Lord. This is the gospel [story] in a nutshell.⁶

He would seem to support the homiletical theories of contemporary writers who insist that the sermon should take the form of what Edmund Steimle calls, echoing H. Grady Davis, “a story told.”⁷ The content of the sermon must not only be biblical—i.e., narrative—but also its shape, to be most effective and to heed Brand's warning, should have narrative form or character. In his book on doctrinal preaching, *Doctrine and Word* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983), Mark Ellingsen offers sermons that demonstrate such preaching.

A study of contemporary lectionaries suggests several strategies for preaching baptism as story, remembering that the Bible is read as The Story. First, the pastoral preacher might preach upon the first sacrament as it surfaces naturally in the course of the lessons in the three year cycle. No less than fifty of the Second Lessons and the Gospels contain mention of, or references to, baptism. A careful study would reveal additional texts that have bearing upon baptism. This means that the lectionaries offer the pastor-preacher an almost unlimited number of opportunities to show what the Scriptures say about this sacrament.

Second, preachers might preach about baptism on some of the times when the sacrament is celebrated as an integral part of congregational worship. If some of the ancient baptismal days—Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany, for example—are designated as baptismal occasions, people will begin to identify their

⁶Martin Luther, “A Brief Instruction on What to Look for and Expect in the Gospels,” *LW* 35.117-18.

⁷See Edmund Steimle, et al., *Preaching the Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980). Cf. also H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958).

baptism with Jesus' baptism at the Jordan and, especially, on the cross. When the preacher, working with the worship committee, establishes baptismal “dates” for celebrating baptism, she or he will have created an opportunity to enlighten and inform people about what it means to be baptized, “sealed with the Holy Spirit and marked with the Cross of Christ forever.” Some of the “green” Sundays of Pentecost may be used in the same manner.

A comprehensive knowledge of the pericopes pays dividends in such planning in the form of “mini-series” of sermons based on appointed lections. For example, Series C offers three lessons—for the 4th, 5th, and 6th Sundays of Pentecost—from Galatians (2:11-21; 3:26-29; 5:1, 13-25). The lesson from 3:26-29 is the key to the series, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ” (3:26). Thus, one baptismal Sunday might be established during this three week period in conjunction with a series of sermons on baptism. In another year, the baptismal occasion might be moved to the 8th, 9th, 10th, or 11th Sunday of Pentecost, and one

could preach baptismal sermons—or portions of sermons—on the second lessons from Colossians (1:1-14; 1:21-28; 2:6-15; 3:1-11) and from the perspective of Colossians 2:12: “and you were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.” In addition, Lutherans may draw upon the set of propers and lessons appointed for the Sacrament of Baptism in the *Ministers Desk Edition* of the LBW.

Third, the pastoral preacher will recognize that Lent and Easter, with their baptismal orientation to Jesus’ death and resurrection, virtually demand a baptismal emphasis to connect Jesus’ willing sacrifice to the life and death of the people. Lent, beginning with its reminder, *MEMENTO MORI*, is the baptismal season par excellence, culminating as it does in the Easter Vigil. Baptism is central in the Lent/Easter experience, and a series on baptismal preaching ought to find its way (some years) into every pastor’s preaching plan, not only for Lent but for Easter too. The baptismal note should always be sounded during the Easter cycle.

Pastors who devise some sort of plan for preaching on baptism, and who learn to preach in the “a story told” style of biblical and narrative preaching, will be offering their people an enriched homiletical diet. Preaching the Word builds up people’s faith; preaching on baptism informs that faith. Thus the “plastic flowers” may be thrown out of the holy water and, as people come to understand the sacrament in the context of the gospel, they may—yes, should—develop a baptismal perspective for living the life in Christ.