

Baptism in the United Church of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and What's Emerging

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, January 20, 2019, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Acts 8:26-39](#) and [Galatians 3:23-29](#)

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Faith, as Pastor Brenda pointed out in her sermon¹ last week, is central to Christianity, and it's important to remember that "faith" and "belief" are different concepts. Belief is intellectual. Faith is relational. While belief can be a component of faith, but it is not all that faith is. Faith is not only or merely that to which we give our mental assent.

Faith orients us. It defines how we approach the world, how we relate to creation. To have faith in the one Jesus called "Abba" is to see creation as loving and hope-filled.

Related to this is the aspect of faith that can be labeled "trust" or even "radical trust." As Marcus Borg put it, "[R]adical trust [in God] is what can free us from that self-preoccupation and anxiety that mars our lives and confines our lives. It frees us for that self-forgetfulness of faith, for that willingness to live our lives in a way that is spent in the name of a larger vision, that willingness to spend and be spent."² Faith as trust allows us to die so we might live; it allows us to take up our cross and follow Jesus.

Faith is also about fidelity. Are we faithful in our relationship with God? Do we trust God to be faithful in relationship with us?

Pastor Brenda reminded us of the ecumenical convergence of understanding baptism that includes these overlapping and complementary understandings:

- Baptism is the cleansing, washing, or forgiveness of sin. This is what John the Baptist preached at the River Jordan and what Peter preached at Pentecost. This can be interpreted as getting afterlife insurance, or as a time of choosing a new direction in life, repentance, a metanoia, a changing of direction. I choose the second of these, which is connected to the next understanding.
- Baptism is a new birth or regeneration. This understanding is echoed in John 3, when Jesus talks about being "born from above" and "born again" in some word play with Nicodemus, and in Paul's second letter to the church in Corinth, chapter 5, when he says that "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." This talk of being "in Christ" is related to the next understanding.
- Baptism is a union with Christ in his death and resurrection. This is especially symbolized in immersion baptism, when a person is buried in the water (and if left there, will die), and then rises to this new life we just talked about.

¹ Brenda Loreman, "A Historical and Ecumenical Look at Baptism," *Niles Discovery Church*, <https://www.nilesdiscoverychurch.org/apps/Sermon.php?SermonID=495> (preached at Niles Discovery Church on 13 January 2019; accessed 19 January 2019).

² Marcus Borg, "What is Faith?" a sermon preached at Calvary Episcopal Church, Memphis Tennessee on 16 March 2001, <http://www.explorefaith.org/LentenHomily03.16.01.html> (accessed 19 Jan 2019).

- Baptism is a reception of the Holy Spirit. Just as the Holy Spirit came upon and claimed Jesus at his baptism, the church says that the Holy Spirit comes upon and claims each one of us at our baptism. One of the gifts that comes from the Holy Spirit is the gift to rise to new life with Christ. The Holy Spirit also unites us into one body, the next understanding of baptism.
- Baptism is incorporation into the church. In baptism, we are not only united with Christ, we are united with each other. We become part of the one body (to use Paul's image), the universal church.

Finally, Pastor Brenda talked about Phyllis Tickle's rummage sale theory. Every 500ish years, a new movement in the church emerges that decides to get rid of old things that are getting in the way. Tickle said that one of the things that spurs this is a question of authority.³ I don't know if she every pointed to this as part of her theory, but around the year 0, within Judaism, there was a new group that emerged that claimed that Jesus had authority. About 500 years later, after the fall of the Roman Empire and the power vacuum that created, there was another question of where authority lay as Europe drifted into its Dark Ages. Around 1000ish, in the Great Schism, the question was about the authority of the bishop of Rome (also known as the Pope). Around 1500ish, in the Great Reformation, reformers on the continent claimed that scripture was the correct authority. And around 2000ish – we're right in the middle of it.

Pastor Brenda noted that two of the major shifts in the primary understandings of baptism happened right around two of these rummage sales, and that (assuming we are in the midst of a rummage sale) another shift in our primary understanding of baptism could be coming. The first of these was the shift to seeing baptism as afterlife insurance, and thus the need to baptize babies – which became normative around 500ish. The second was the reemergence of believer's baptism as part of the Great Reformation in the 1500s.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and the United Church of Christ, the two denominations that we are officially a part of, come from the same part of the Christian tree – the Protestant part – though they come from different branches. In the 1500s, there were two breakings-away from the Roman Catholic Church, one centered in Germany and Switzerland, and one centered in England. They are both categorized as part of the Great Reformation. However, I think the real reformation in England was delayed.

You're probably at least a little familiar with some of the main characters involved in the Reformation in mainland Europe. Martin Luther, a Catholic priest, sought to get his church back on track and ended up getting kicked out and starting the Lutheran churches. Once Luther questioned the authority of the Pope, lots of other people did, too. Huldrych Zwingli brought his twist to the Reformation in Zurich. A little later, John Calvin, put his twist on the Reformation movement in Geneva. Calvin influenced John Knox, who brought Calvinism to Scotland (and started Presbyterianism there).

Meanwhile, in England, Henry VIII, broke with the Roman Catholic Church, establishing the Anglican Church. He didn't do a major makeover of Catholicism (as was happening in Germany and Switzerland and spreading across Europe), as much as he

³ She mentioned this in a talk I heard her give years ago. Though I don't remember where I was (or she, she Skyped in) and when this was, that particular idea stuck with me.

changed the name. Essentially, he replaced the Pope with himself, creating the English Catholic Church (as opposed to the Roman Catholic Church). Of course, that wasn't the official name and it's an overstatement, but it's good enough for today.

I don't think the true reformation of Christianity in England happened until the Puritans and Pilgrims came along. They were the ones who called for radical shifting. The Pilgrims wanted to leave England to found their theocratic utopia in the Americas. The Puritans wanted to purify the Church of England. Congregationalism came out of those two traditions.

The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) comes out of Presbyterianism – which came from John Knox, who was influenced so heavily by John Calvin. The Christian Church movement was also influenced by the Baptists.

The United Church of Christ is the merging together of four major (and several minor) streams in the first half of the 20th century. Those major streams have their headwaters on different Protestant mountains. The German Evangelicals in American stream is primarily fed by Luther's Reformation. The German Reformed Church in American is primarily fed by Zwingli's Reformation. As I mentioned, the Congregationalist Church in American came from the Puritan/Pilgrim Reformation. And (believe it or not) it's the Baptist Reformation that Pastor Brenda mentioned last week that fed the fourth stream called "the Christian Church" (a similar movement that happened simultaneously to the development of the Christian Church movement out of which the Disciples of Christ comes, though in different geographic locations).

Given this diversity, you might think that there has to be a huge diversity of understandings of baptism within the United Church of Christ, let alone between the UCC and the Disciples of Christ. Surprisingly, there isn't. The biggest differences have to do with *how much*: how much faith and how much water. I'll unpack that in a moment

First, let's go back to the ecumenical understandings of baptism. There's one more understanding I want to add to this list. It wasn't on Pastor Brenda's list last week because there isn't an ecumenical convergence on this understanding. Though perhaps many or even most denominations would have this understanding, there hasn't been ecumenical discussion about it.

This sixth understanding sees baptism as the great equalizer. We heard about this in our Epistle lesson today. "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." The church in Galatia was debating if Jesus-followers needed to keep all the Hebraic laws.

Paul says that in baptism, we lose the identities we had that divide us into groups. When we "put on Christ," when we are "clothed with Christ," the divisions of Jew/Greek, slave/free, male/female disappear and we become one in Christ. In baptism we are incorporated into the church. And, because baptism is the great equalizer, the distinctions that separate us in the rest of the world disappear in church.

This is echoed our reading from Acts. An outsider's outsider – he's black, he's a convert to Judaism (or maybe only a spiritual seeker), he works for a foreign government,

and he's a eunuch (and therefore within Judaism officially seen as not whole) – and none of these is a reason to withhold baptism. For we are all equally one in Christ.

All six of these understandings of baptism are held by both denominations, though perhaps one understanding being of more importance than another within a different region or congregation – which isn't surprising given the theological spectrum within both denominations. For instance, progressive congregations might deemphasize the idea of baptism being a cleaning of sin and emphasize baptism as being a great equalizer.

As I said, the big difference has to do with *how much*: how much faith and how much water. Because three of the four streams that largely made up the United Church of Christ came out of Protestant traditions that continued to practice infant baptism as normative, most congregations in the UCC have continued to practice infant baptism. In these churches, baptism does not require any faith on the part of the baptized. And from a practical point of view – we're talking about infants here – immersion isn't practiced. So, how much? No faith and not much water.

Disciples congregations and congregations in the UCC that came out of the UCC's Christian Church stream practice believer's baptism, and typically by full immersion. In other words, they require some faith and generally want to use lots of water.

We'll look more deeply at this point of divergence on February 17 when we talk about the baptismal liturgy, because while these are theological issues, they play themselves out liturgically. For now let me say this. Because I do not believe there is any need for baptismal afterlife insurance, there is no need to baptize infants. And so, when it comes to understanding baptism, we should assume that believer's baptism is normative.

In other words, we should expect some faith if we're going to baptize someone. (And remember the beginning of this sermon. Expecting faith is not the same as expecting belief. Expecting faith is about expecting the person to be in relationship with God, and in particular God as revealed by Jesus.) We should also use some water, but, as I said, we'll talk more about that on February 17.

That's what the church should expect of someone seeking baptism. But what can a person expect of the church? We are, I suspect, in the midst of another rummage sale. We are in the midst of what Tickle labeled "The Great Emergence." Is a new understanding of baptism coming with it? Maybe.

In the early church, baptism was seen as a sort of matriculation. When someone was baptized, they started their journey as a follower of Jesus. This is what happened with the Ethiopian eunuch. Eventually, it became a marking point along the journey. People might study and practice the way of Jesus for years before taking the plunge (literally and figuratively) of the commitment of baptism. Then baptism became the antidote to original sin. And then, for at least some of the church, it became again a matriculation into a journey of discipleship that invites people into a new life free from past sin, that invites them into union with Jesus and to receive the Holy Spirit, that incorporates them into the faith and family of Jesus, and that makes them equal with all Jesus' disciples.

If something new is coming, I don't know what it is. I can't help but wonder if, as Christianity loses sway in American culture (which I think is a good thing), baptism might

regain that radical nature and commitment it once implied. I can't help but wonder if choosing to be a Christian, if choosing to follow Jesus will become such an atypical choice that choosing baptism will become a sign of a deeper commitment than it seems to be now.

This leads me to a few questions for your contemplation:

- What does it mean to you to be a follower of Jesus?
- If baptism isn't the sacrament of the church that incorporates you into the faith and family of Jesus, what is?
- Can one be a follower of Jesus and not be baptized?
- If you are baptized, what does your baptism mean to you?