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Just As I Am: Believer's Baptism and Intellectual Disability

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Abstract

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By Kristin Adkins Whitesides

In the Free Church tradition, baptism occurs only when an individual responds to God's grace by personally claiming and testifying to his or her faith. Questions of readiness, understanding, and belief all play important roles in determining how, when, and who to baptize. This project outlines the way in which First Baptist sought to make room in the waters of baptism for people with intellectual disabilities. Yet, even more broadly, this project seeks to deepen and reshape how a congregation understands the intersections of God, the individual, and a believing community in this important practice of the faith.

Just As I Am: Believer's Baptism and Intellectual Disability

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Introduction

Billy has been part of the worshipping community at First Baptist Church, Winchester, Virginia for six years. He sits toward the back of the sanctuary with his parents and wears headphones during the service in order to block out the loud noise of the organ. But with or without headphones, Billy is always listening and learning. As an adopted 23 year old with autism and intellectual disabilities, Billy's life has been marked by very particular and personal struggles. In the midst of those struggles, First Baptist has become another adopted family of sorts, one whose job it is to join his parents in the nurture and affirmation of his faith.

Like every other member, Billy's journey of faith has been one of both joy and challenge. Because of Billy's presence, church leaders have come to recognize how some congregational rituals and practices, while defining and expressing the identity of our church body, also create restrictions to membership and full participation for those who do not communicate or function in what society or what the church might imagine to be typical ways.

Of particular concern is the practice of believer's baptism. In the free church tradition, baptism occurs only when an individual responds to God's grace by personally claiming and testifying to his or her faith. Questions of readiness, understanding, and belief all play important roles in determining how, when, and who to baptize.

This project outlines the way in which First Baptist sought to make room in the waters of baptism for people like Billy who have intellectual disabilities. Yet, even more broadly, this project seeks to deepen and reshape how a congregation understands the intersections of God, the individual, and a believing community in this important practice

of the faith. By claiming a more robust baptismal theology that decenters the individual as the only or primary actor in baptism, First Baptist was able to create room in its baptismal liturgy and within its church life for varied ways to express faith and respond to God's grace. In the same way, the church was able to reclaim the congregational role of affirming and nurturing the faith of all new believers as they continue their journey of faith. First Baptist was able to recover baptism as a congregational practice and not simply an individual act, living more fully into its identity as the body of Christ characterized by welcome, vulnerability, and mutual dependence.

The first section of this paper will dig into the theological framework for believer's baptism and how it might be both challenged and enriched by the work of disability theologians. The second section of this paper will examine how First Baptist was able to engage with these issues through an eight-week Bible study. In the third section of the paper, the curriculum will be evaluated, leading to insights on how the congregation might be led into new avenues of ministry and theology in the future.

Believer's Baptism and Intellectual Disability

Believer's Baptism and Baptist Theology

All too often, when Baptists speak about what they believe about baptism, they speak about their practices instead of their theology. For Baptists, the mode of baptism, immersion, and the subjects of baptism, believers, become the primary focus. As Norman Maring and Winthrop Hudson note, "Baptists have often been remiss about undergirding their baptismal practice with a theology of baptism."[1] Perhaps this is because there is not a single Baptist theology as it relates to baptism, but instead theologies.

[1] Norman H. Maring and Winthrop S. Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice*, Revised Edition (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1991), 150.

Anthony R. Cross, in his book *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain* writes, "there is no single Baptist theology or practice of baptism, only theologies and practices, and this diversity accords with Baptist ecclesiology which continues to tend towards independency."[2] This diversity of theology and practice may also be attributed to the multivalent meanings of baptism itself. As Cross notes, Baptists have variously understood baptism as the door to the church; a profession of faith; a symbol of death, burial, and resurrection; union with Christ; an act of obedience; and a proclamation of the gospel.[3] And yet underpinning each of these understandings is the assertion that baptism signifies an inward shift or conversion.[4] Even among Baptists who have reclaimed a more sacramental notion of baptism, the practice continues to be understood as an outward sign of the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit.[5]

And yet, the issue remains: what are the guidelines by which one measures conversion, faith, or belief? While most Baptists agree that baptism must occur in response to faith as a voluntary and conscious act of the believer, the prerequisite belief is hard to define. The onus is frequently placed on the individual to claim his or her faith, articulating it through some sort of public testimony.

Yet as Wayne Stacy notes in *A Baptist Theology*, the notion that one can fully understand faith is fundamentally flawed. He writes, "If one has to 'understand' before one can appropriately submit to baptism, then would somebody please identify for me that absolute, non-negotiable 'something' that must be understood? And even if we could

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[2] Anthony R. Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 455.

[3] Ibid., 29-41.

[4] Ibid., 31.

[5] Ibid., 28.

establish such a thing, who among us will decide when it is properly understood?"[6] This is the crux of the issue as Baptists begin to negotiate how their theology shapes their practice—and vice versa—in light of intellectual disability.

Rethinking Inclusion

Over time, Baptist theologians and practitioners have been confronted with this issue, addressing the challenge posed by intellectual disability with varying degrees of success. Paul Fiddes, a British Baptist theologian working within the field of Baptist sacramentalism, acknowledges that his theology of baptism does require some demands on a baptismal candidate, namely a response of trust in God and a commitment to serve God in the world. Fiddes notes that the issue of intellectual disability arises when understandings of baptism place emphasis on a personal confession of faith, particularly if that confession "is taken to mean a strong ability to understand and communicate concepts."[7] However, he argues that both requirements of trust and commitment to service can be accompanied by varying degrees of understanding or articulation.

According to Fiddes, there are two paths individuals may follow within the community of faith: a journey towards faith and a journey within faith. He writes, "Some will belong by being embraced within the body, surrounded and wrapped around by the love of the members; others will be members of the body themselves."[8] But he cautions that it takes spiritual discernment to know which journey an individual is on. "When

[6] R. Wayne Stacy, "Baptism," in *A Baptist's Theology* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1999), 153–74, 167.

[7] Paul S. Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology*, vol. 13, Studies in Baptist History and Thought (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2003), 153.

[8] Ibid.

response and discipleship are discerned, it is right to baptize. But all, let us remember, are accepted; there are different ways of belonging, of which baptism is one."[9]

While this does provide a way forward for churches that require a particular articulation of belief, it seems to create tiers of membership or inclusion that continue to be problematic. Perhaps understanding this, Fiddes concludes his argument by making room for God's Spirit, writing, "There is, I believe, no disability or illness that means someone must be excluded from believers' baptism. The boundary of baptism includes only those who trust and are committed to discipleship, but we will constantly be surprised by those who fulfill those conditions and whom God deeply desires to meet with grace in the waters of death and resurrection."[10] Though while God's Spirit may be at work, the problem remains for a congregation to be willing or able to notice, affirm, and support varied forms of faith expression within their practices of baptism.

Writing from a more practical standpoint, Faith Bowers, part of an organization called BUild "the Baptist Union initiative with people with learning disabilities," in Britain argues that the hope for inclusion must be balanced by the desire for integrity. She recognizes that the impulse towards inclusion without a grappling with the theological questions beneath the impulse will lead to more questions than answers. However, she also notes that what constitutes belief is hard to define. She writes, "Perhaps we can leave the matter of understanding to God. There is something lovely about the accounts of churches going to considerable trouble to ensure that confirmation or believer's baptism is a precious occasion for such candidates. So much loving care is

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 155.

surely something God can use in his own way."[11] Bowers thus articulates the congregational role in discerning God's movement in the lives of its members.

Ultimately, Bowers argues, there is a difference between admission to the church and its ordinances or sacraments and full and unfettered acceptance within the larger church body. She writes, "The whole church needs to be big enough to carry the weaker member not so much by proxy faith as in corporate faith. Then the sacraments can above all be the way in which severely handicapped people know that they truly belong to the body of Christ."[12] For Bowers, the emphasis is on a local congregation's discernment of its own theology. Yet one wonders how this is accomplished faithfully and well.

It is within this interplay of theological affirmations and congregational practices that a church confirms its shared faith. Therefore, though baptism in the Baptist tradition is predicated on the notion that an individual has responded to Christ in some way, the nature of the response is more fluid than usually imagined. Churches that have welcomed and integrated those with intellectual disabilities into their body of faith recognize that there is more than one criterion by which faith and response are measured. Another member of BUild, Michael Taylor notes, "We cannot wait, as with children, until [those with intellectual disabilities] are 'ready' since we do not know what progress they will make, and they may never be more ready than they are now…They, like everyone else, can only be asked to respond as the people they are."[13] A congregation's understanding of baptism, therefore, is ultimately connected to a deeper question of what constitutes personhood.

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[11] Faith Bowers, *Who's This Sitting In My Pew?: Mentally Handicapped People in the Church* (London: Triangle, 1988), 75.

[12] Bowers, 76.

[13] Michael Taylor, "Include Them Out?," in *Let Love Be Genuine: Mental Handicap and the Church*, ed. Faith Bowers (London: Baptist Union, 1985), 47.

Rethinking Personhood

The most prevalent and common understanding of theological anthropology in Western theology locates the *imago Dei* within a human's capacity to reason or act. The *telos* of being human is, in this definition, the refining of and utilization of those capabilities.[14] If this is the case, then those who do not share those capacities of reason or will cannot participate in the full experience or purpose of human life nor can their lives be regarded as inherently good.[15] John Swinton writes, "Behind these types of debates about personhood lurks a particular view of what human beings are and should be and what desirable human living should look like. In other words, they are morally biased and deeply value-laden even if they hide behind the mask of logical rationality."[16]

Offering an important corrective, disability theologians situate identity within relationships rather than agency or reason. Thomas E. Reynolds argues that "self-definition and social definition are internally related, symbiotic."[17] Focusing on individual autonomy as the sole basis for human worth is reductive and, ultimately, dangerous. For Reynolds, theologians must reject what he terms the "cult of normalcy"—the notion that there are two categories of humans: normal and abnormal, disabled and non-disabled.[18] He argues, "Disability is not something less than normal, an inferior or broken nature…All people are linked indissolubly, sharing a fundamental condition: vulnerable personhood."[19] This universal vulnerability and reliance on one

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[14] Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 279.

[15] Ibid., 280.

[16] John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 130.

[17] Thomas Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Ada, MI: Brazos Press, 2008), 105.

[18] Ibid., 20.

[19] Ibid., 105.

another not only construct a fuller sense of identity but also pushes one to embrace a richer understanding of human solidarity.

This reconstruction of theological anthropology has its roots in the Trinitarian understanding of God. John Swinton writes, "the inherently relational nature of human beings emerges from the nature and relational shape of the God in whose image they are created, a God who is a Trinity of persons. God is a perichoretic community of love constituted by the relationships of the three persons of the Trinity."[20] Hans Reinders, using a similar Trinitarian argument writes, "Theologically speaking, we are truly human because we are drawn into the communion with God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."[21] Likewise, Jason Whitt argues that the *imago Dei* is not found in something intrinsic to humans but is a gift of God beyond one's self.[22]

As life is recognized as a gift from God, the desire to live autonomous or independent lives is challenged. As Swinton notes, "we need one another to be who we are. Recognition and identity formation are the tasks of the human community."[23] The work of the church then becomes to embody the same gifts of friendship that each human has received from God. The goal is not simply the inclusion of those who are different or who challenge the common theological anthropology based on reason or agency, but instead a "reshaping of the Christian imagination such that those with disabilities are no longer seen as other."[24] Swinton writes:

> Humans are much more complicated than rules and formulae can allow for. While our scientistic leanings may push us to make so-called rational decisions,

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[20] Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*., 158.

[21] Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*., 273-274.

[22] Jason D. Whitt, "In the Image of God: Receiving Children with Special Needs," *Review & Expositor* 113, no. 2 (May 2016): 205–16, 211.

[23] Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God, 159*.

[24] Whitt, "In the Image of God,"213.

> the 'I-Thou' relationship remains primal and draws us inevitably back into forms of relationships where closeness and intimacy matter. The language of capacities gives us distance and a perception of objectivity; but as soon as we're forced to come close, we learn that such language cannot really shield us from the deep pains of committed love. Coming close changes things.[25]

Within the body of Christ, diversity is celebrated and welcomed. The church becomes the locus of hospitality, a place where individuals come close to one another, learn how to trust one another, and, ultimately, recognize their deep need not only for God but for each other. Personhood is not defined by reason or agency but instead by relationships rooted in mutual vulnerability.

Recovering the Three-Fold Nature of Baptism

This shift in theological anthropology allows Baptists to reclaim a deeper understanding of baptism as well. In this robust theology of baptism, the response of the individual is important but it is no more important than the work of God or the work of the church. In this way, James McClendon speaks of baptism as a "triply enacted sign, a deed in which *God* and *candidate* and (through its designated minister) *church* all act to effect a turn in one life-story (the candidate's) on the basis of Jesus' crucified and risen life. Baptism brings those two lives together in the ongoing 'life-story' of the people of God."[26] Baptism, within this understanding, is part of a larger journey of faith. It marks neither the beginning point nor the end point of an individual's faith. Instead, it marks a response to God's preceding work as well as acknowledging the continued work of God in the life of the individual as he or she joins the larger work of the church. The journey of faith for each individual is folded into the common life of the church so that there are

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[25] Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God*, 133.

[26] James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine*, vol. 2, Systematic Theology (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 390.

both individual and corporate elements.[27] The church, therefore, becomes a witness to the ways that God acts to form and transform the lives of individuals and communities with baptism acting as one marker along the journey of faith.

Baptists have been divided about whether baptism is most aptly considered an ordinance or a sacrament. For those who argue it is an ordinance, baptism is an outward sign of a shift or conversion that has already happened. Thus W. T. Conner writes, "While baptism does not save, nor is a condition of salvation, it does symbolize a salvation that comes to us by faith in Christ."[28] Other Baptists have argued that baptism is not merely a symbol of something that has already been accomplished but instead a mode by which God's grace is conveyed. It is in baptism that one joins the church and becomes a member of its body. Therefore, something is achieved in the actual practice of baptism. James McClendon therefore calls baptism a "performative sign." Using sign-act theory, he argues that something is happening at baptism in the words spoken and the actions performed. Christopher Ellis writes:

> The proclamation [in baptism] must be more than simply someone confessing his or her faith; otherwise we could dispense with the water! Proclamation is to be found in the whole fabric of meanings, only some of which will be unraveled in the course of a lifetime. Here is the proclamation of a mystery. The mystery of Christ and our salvation demands a sign greater than words; it requires a proclamation that goes beyond definitions and easy statements.[29]

Therefore baptism becomes an initiation rite into a believing community. The work of the believing community is to continue the work of identity formation that is claimed at baptism.

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[27] James Wm. McClendon Jr., "Toward a Conversionist Spirituality," in *Ties That Bind: Life Together in the Baptist Vision* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1994), 23–32, 26.

[28] W.T. Conner, *Christian Doctrine* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1937), 278.

[29] Christopher Ellis, "Baptism and the Sacramental Freedom of God," in *Reflections on the Water: Understanding God and the World Through the Baptism of Believers*, ed. Paul S. Fiddes, Regent's Study Guides 4 (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 1996), 37.

With this sacramental understanding of baptism, the starting point for baptismal theology is always God's grace. Richard Kidd argues that one way to address issues of intellectual disability and baptism is to "shift the focus of identity from the boundary to the centre and to exploit, as it were, the centrifugal energy that radiates from the Christ who shapes the baptismal sign."[30] By recognizing the central force of God's grace and work in faith and in baptism, Baptists allow space for all to come to the water. Faith is a journey and Christian initiation is a process that is characterized, as Paul Fiddes notes, "by an interplay of divine grace and human faith at all stages…At any stage in this process of making a partnership (or covenant), baptism can be a meeting-place between grace and faith and so can focus the two realities. We need to abandon the stereotypes that infant baptism only expresses divine grace, and that believers' baptism only witnesses to human faith."[31] God's grace shapes the lives of individuals long before they are able to recognize or respond to that grace. However, there are various moments within the journey of faith in which believers are able to mark their experience. McClendon writes that "Baptism is first of all God's word to us…In it he offers us initiation into new life."[32] In baptism, God speaks the same word to the candidate that was spoken to Jesus, "You are my son/daughter." The practice of baptism then becomes a way by which believers are able to witness to their experience of God's action and movement in their lives.

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[30] Richard Kidd, "Baptism and the Identity of Christian Communities," in *Reflections on the Water: Understanding God and the World through the Baptism of Believers,* Regent's Study Guides 4 (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 1996), 96.

[31] Fiddes, *Tracks and Traces: Baptist Identity in Church and Theology, 145*.

[32] James Wm. McClendon Jr., "Baptism as a Performative Sign," *Theology Today* 23, no. 3 (1966): 403–416, 410-411.

In hearing God's words of grace, blessing, and naming, an individual then responds by confessing his or her faith. Warren Carr writes, "Faith is response, in surrender and gratitude, to God's loving. It is not predicated upon what is to be but what already is."[33] Baptism too is a response to a profession or claiming of personal faith. It does not create faith but signifies a faith that already exists.[34] In most Baptist churches this confession of faith, either through personal testimony or in a series of questions asked by the presiding minister of the candidate, is one of the most foundational elements of the practice. Only after the profession or confession of faith is a person baptized.[35] Baptism then becomes a "person-centered event," something that occurs according to the faithful response of each individual.[36] The most faithful evaluation and affirmation of those responses will take place within a local community of believers.

Perhaps most neglected in Baptist understandings of baptism is the emphasis on the work of a congregation or community to shape and support the journey of faith of each member.[37] Because believer's baptism serves as an initiation into a community, it can never simply be a personal act.[38] Instead, the role of the community is vitally important before, at, and after baptism. Stanley Grenz, drawing on the work of social theorists studying the formation of communities writes of baptism:

In baptism, the story of the participant comes to be linked with the story of God's

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[33] Warren Carr, *Baptism: Conscience and Clue for the Church* (New York: Hold, Rinehart and Winston, 1964), 178.

[34] Curtis W. Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 379.

[35] Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 397-398.

[36] Roger Hayden, "Believers Baptized: An Anthology," in *Reflections on the Water: Understanding God and the World through the Baptism of Believers*, Regent's Study Guides 4 (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 1996), 19.

[37] Cross, *Baptism and the Baptists: Theology and Practice in Twentieth-Century Britain*, 405.

[38] Jason D. Whitt, "Baptism and Profound Intellectual Disability," *The Center for Christian Ethics*, Christian Reflection, no. Disability (2012): 60–67, 62.

> past action in Jesus, as recited by the narrating community. Baptism thereby symbolically bestows upon the participant a new identity based on the past events of Jesus' death, for the baptismal candidate is being initiated into the company of those who have died with Christ. At the same time, the new identity symbolically conferred through baptism has its basis in the future…For this reason, baptism points beyond initiation into the Christian life to the goal of God's saving activity.[39]

The community therefore embodies the narrative of God's work in the world. Believers learn what it means to be disciples as they are shaped by that narrative and by the practices of their believing communities both before and after baptism. It is the work of these practicing communities to navigate together what it means to believe, to baptize, and to incorporate each new member into the larger story of God's work and their shared faith.

Plan and Design of Curriculum

From Theoretical to Practical

Don Saliers writes:

> The movement from adopting an 'inclusive' attitude on the part of the leadership to the actual life of being a place of 'belonging' is itself a maturation, both theological and moral… If 'inclusiveness' is to be more than a slogan, our practice must lead to acknowledgment of common humanity in the image of God and to the discovery of what it means to be 'present' to one another.[40]

It is not enough to simply accept those with intellectual disabilities. Churches must engage in the more difficult work of reimagining and rethinking their theologies and practices so that they can more fully embrace all in their worship and in their common life. To that end, I created a Bible study for the fall of 2017 at First Baptist Winchester that sought to locate baptism not as an exclusionary boundary marker for the church but

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[39] Stanley J. Grenz, "Baptism and the Lord's Supper as Community Acts: Toward a Sacramental Understanding of the Ordinances," in *Baptist Sacramentalism:*, ed. Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, Reprint edition (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2007), 76–95, 93.

[40] Don E. Saliers, "Toward a Spirituality of Inclusiveness," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy L. Eiesland and Don E. Saliers (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 29.

instead a moment of celebration and incorporation of an individual into the larger body of Christ.

The Bible study at First Baptist, Winchester took place over the course of eight weeks on Wednesday evenings from September to November. Primarily the study involved adults from their thirties to their nineties although once a month children and youth also participated. Each class lasted about an hour. Before beginning the first session of the study, the class was asked to fill out an introductory survey that allowed them to share their understandings of baptism. Each question was open-ended, providing for thoughtful and unique answers from the participants.

The survey made clear that the class primarily understood baptism as an individual's decision to become a Christian. When asked about the appropriate age at which a person should be baptized, 40 percent of the respondents said that a person ought to be "old enough to understand" what baptism signified or meant. When asked what needed to occur prior to baptism, a similar number of respondents named "accepting Jesus" as a requirement. Similarly, most respondents said that "unbelievers" ought not to be baptized, though this disbelief was not defined. Though baptism was thought to encompass a large swath of symbolic meanings, most respondents said that it pointed towards faith, an inward change, and new life.

The language used to express the role of the community in baptism was much broader than expected as respondents wrote about the congregation's role in supporting, welcoming, guiding, and affirming the faith of those seeking baptism. Often, respondents would write more than one sentence to describe the role of the congregation in baptism. However, more troubling, participants were unable to clearly articulate the role of God in

baptism with over 35 percent of the respondents noting that they were unsure of God's role or simply skipping the question altogether. One respondent wrote, "May the force be with us. This is too deep for me."[41]

To address these deficiencies in theological foundations, I crafted a course that began with a broad discussion of water and baptism in Scripture and then zoomed in more closely on the practices of baptism across centuries and traditions, finally situating the practice of believer's baptism within Scripture to mine not only its richness but also to name its dangers.[42]

A Church of Water and Fire

Because the class predominately understood baptism through the lens of individual belief, it was necessary to begin the course by first broadening and deepening their theological framework for baptism itself. In order to introduce the rich symbolic world of baptism, the class began by meditating on the role of water in Scripture. Fred Edie's book *Book, Bath, Table, and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry* served as an invaluable resource during this section of the study. Fred Edie, in discussing baptism with youth, writes, "The waters of baptism may symbolize the great sweep of salvation history from God's mighty acts of creation through covenant making with Israel, redemption in and through Jesus Christ, the gift of the Spirit and the birth of the church, to Christ's promised return and the fulfillment of God's reign."[43] As the class considered the various stories of water in Scripture, they noted that the stories spanned the various parts of Scripture.

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[41] For more information about the presurvey responses, please see the tables in Appendix A.

[42] For a more thorough summary of each session of the Bible study, please refer to Appendix B.

[43] Fred Edie, *Book, Bath, Table, and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry*, Youth Ministry Alternatives (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 134.

Water, it was seen, was used to depict danger and deliverance, chaos and creation, boundaries from one way of life or identity to the next, and commissioning into new work. Those themes then became our guide for the next few weeks of study. During each session, the class was challenged to see how the symbolic significance of water in Scripture provided a framework for more deeply understanding the symbolic value of baptism as well. At any one moment baptism might be signifying many different things both in the life of the individual as well as the life of the community and the larger Biblical witness on which that community was formed. Rather than focus only on the mode or subjects of baptism, the class was invited to engage more deeply with the theological framework Scripture provides for the practice.

This interpretive exploration of water in Scripture allowed the class to then move forward to begin exploring how baptism itself was understood and practiced in the early church as well as modern communities of faith today. As noted in the beginning survey, the class struggled to name the ways that God was involved in baptism. This section of the course focused on God's movement within baptism and within the larger community of faith. Using Robin M. Jensen's book *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions*, the class explored the wind, fire, and dove images of the Holy Spirit.[44] Often used in to decorate ancient baptismal pools, these images became a gateway by which the class could imagine how the Holy Spirit incorporates an individual into a community.

In the depictions of the early church in both Acts and the writings of Paul, baptism becomes the primary identity marker for the new Christian, replacing the other

[44] Robin M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

identities of the past. The class was challenged to explain why the church uses white baptismal robes, why candidates are given candles, why salt is placed on their lips, why baptismal hymns are sung. Exploring the liturgy and prayers, the language and symbols of our practice, the class was able to begin imagining the connective work of God's Spirit within the life of a congregation.

Triply Enacted Sign

And yet it seems clear that the practices of a church often shape its theology as much as theology shapes practice. Therefore, in order to fully reclaim the broad theological framework for baptism, the class was invited to think more deeply about baptismal practices themselves. In order to do this, the class considered how baptism has been depicted on television and in film. After each clip was shown, the class was invited to name what seemed strange about the baptism shown, what seemed joyful, what the baptism was accomplishing, and how the baptism depicted was like the baptisms in our church.

In *Nacho Libre*, a concerned friend baptizes his counterpart without his consent by coming up behind him and quickly dunking his head in a bowl of water. Though the friend argues that he does not believe in God, the *luchador* monk Ignacio or "Nacho Libre," concerned for his friend's soul, baptizes him anyways.[45] In an episode of *All in the Family*, Archie Bunker brings his grandson into a church at night to baptize him against his parents' wishes. The priest also refuses to baptize the child if the parents are unwilling to allow it, and so Archie takes matters into his own hands.[46] In the discussion of both clips, the class noted that there was no community of faith present, just one

[45] *Nacho Libre*, directed by Jared Hess (Paramount Pictures, 2006), DVD (Paramount, 2006).

[46] *All in the Family*, season 6, episode 22, "Joey's Baptism," directed by Paul Bogart, aired February 23, 1976, on CBS, DVD (Sony Entertainment, 2009).

individual baptizing another individual. There also was no response of faith from the individual being baptized.

At the beginning of the movie, *The Lion King*, Simba is presented as the newest member of the royal family. Though not a baptism per se, the presentation ceremony involves a mandrill leader rubbing the lion cub's forehead with the juice of a fruit and then lifting him up for the community to see. They celebrate his birth and then bow in deference.[47] The class noted that the community that was missing in the first two clips was present in *The Lion King* clip as the animals celebrated at Simba's presentation. And yet there was still no sense in which God or the individual's faith in God was recognized.

Finally, in *O, Brother Where Art Thou?* Delmar, one of the three thieves around whom the movie revolves, joins a crowd making their way to a river for baptism. Caught up in the excitement of the moment he wades into the water with them and comes out rejoicing and sharing his newfound faith.[48] Here, an individual's faith takes center stage, though the believing community encourages him and surrounds him as he makes his decision and is baptized. The class resonated most clearly with this clip, as Delmar's testimony pointed toward the saving work of God and utilized many of the symbols and much of the language of our own practices of baptism. However, it became clear that Delmar's baptism took place outside of a larger framework of theological nurture or faith formation when, soon after his baptism, Delmar returned to a life of crime.

Turning to consider First Baptist's baptismal practices, the class was asked to list the "requirements" they believe are necessary for baptism. They worked at tables to

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[47] *The Lion King*, directed by Roger Allers and Rob Minkoff (Walt Disney Pictures, 1994), DVD (Walt Disney Home Entertainment, 2017).

[48] *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, directed by Joel Coen and Ethan Coen (Working Title Films, 2000), DVD (Buena Vista Home Entertainment, 2001).

write a "job description" for baptism and then shared the descriptions with the larger group. I noted that neither God nor community played a pivotal role in any of the descriptions, encouraging the class to think of how baptism might be reconsidered as a response to what God has already done, an invitation to participate in something that God has already enacted.

The parable of Great Banquet in Luke 14:15-21 served as a helpful reframing of the work of the congregation, not simply as witnesses of baptism but active participants in the invitation to and development of faith. Luke 14:21b-23 writes, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled." In this parable, there are no requirements for the banquet attendees except their willingness to come. The class was challenged to think about how our focus on an individual and their ability to respond or articulate faith might unintentionally undercut our call to join God in the work of invitation and inclusion, particularly as it relates to those with intellectual disability.

Who's In and Who's Out?

Recognizing the way our practices shape our theology and vice versa, the class then returned to Scriptural accounts of baptism, particularly in the book of Acts, seeking clues for how such baptisms not only reshape an individual but also a believing community. As Willie J. Jennings notes in his commentary on Acts, the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 "highlight[s] a crucial question that the church has struggled to answer: What does it mean to embrace those who are different from us for

the sake of the gospel?"[49] The church is challenged to seek the Spirit's guidance as it discerns how to answer similar questions posed by those who appear to stand outside the "cult of normalcy" that the church and society have constructed.

Amos Yong uses the story of the Ethiopian eunuch as an analog to disability. Noting that the eunuch could be understood to have disabilities, categorized in the Holiness Code among those with physical defects, Yong argues that Luke's story is "powerfully subversive because it shows how all three categories of ancient Greek stereotypes were undermined: neither the eunuch's Ethiopian background (the ethnographic), nor his physical deformity (the anatomical), nor his association with the weakness represented by sheep in the Isaianic passage he was reading…hindered the eunuch's baptism and inclusion in the coming reign of God."[50] Therefore, Lukan stories such as this one illustrate the way those with disabilities are included in the people of God without being "healed" first. Yong writes, "Here the redemption of disability doesn't necessarily consist in the healing of disabilities but involves the removal of those barriers--social, structural, economic, political, and religious/theological--which hinder those people with temporarily able bodies from welcoming and being hospitable to people with disabilities."[51]

When studying this text, the class noted the ways that ethnicity, geography, and purity codes all might restrict the eunuch from being incorporated into a believing community. And yet when the eunuch asks: "Look, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" (Acts 8:36b) it becomes clear that for Philip, as the representation

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[49] Willie James Jennings, *Acts*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 87.

[50] Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 68.

[51] Ibid., 69.

of the believing community, the answer is that none of the previously conceived restrictions should apply.

This is a hopeful episode in the book of Acts for Baptists who seek to reimagine baptismal practices within the context of intellectual disability. Similarly, in stories such as Peter and Cornelius and Paul and Ananias, baptism becomes a way to affirm belief, experience grace, and build the body of Christ. In each case, those who were typically understood as standing outside the boundaries of God's grace or God's people are brought close and invited to join the community of faith.

Inclusion into the community of faith is not separated, however, from the larger work of the church. Philip reads Scripture with the Ethiopian eunuch. Peter and Cornelius are led into deeper understandings of God's Spirit and the community that Spirit is forming. Ananias helps Paul in his distress, drawing close to him and calling him "brother" despite his history of persecuting Ananias' people. These acts of discipleship, forgiveness, and community formation are fundamentally important as one comes to understand the proper location of baptism within the larger life and ministry of a congregation.

Brass Tacks

In the final session of the class, those gathered, including children and youth, were invited to write letters to imaginary baptismal candidates. In the letters, they were asked to point to how God was working in baptism, what the individual was doing, and how the community was responding. Using the letters written, the class then identified themes and language that they wanted to incorporate into a congregational liturgy of response at the time of baptism in our church.

The baptismal liturgy of the congregation already includes an introduction of the candidate, a prayer over the waters, questions posed to the candidate, a time for the candidate to confess his or her faith, and the baptism itself. As newly baptized members emerge from the water at First Baptist they are given a candle and reminded that they are called to be the light of the world and salt is placed on their lips as they are reminded that they are called to be the salt of the earth. And yet the congregation has never been given an opportunity to respond to what they have witnessed. Therefore, the class wrote an addition to the baptismal liturgy that sought to summarize what the congregation believed was occurring in the waters. Before the candidate leaves the baptismal pool, the new congregational blessing will be read responsively:

Leader: *Name*, you have been baptized into this congregation and into the Church universal. Now we welcome you as a member of this community of faith and we ask God to bless you and equip you to serve, sharing in the life and witness of God's kingdom.

People: Amen.

Leader: Sisters and brothers, we are now called to receive this one into the membership of this congregation. As we welcome him/her, we promise to become for him/her a community of encouragement, support, and shared ministry. What do you say today to this newest member of our church?

People: **We celebrate today as we witness your baptism and recognize God's work in your life. We thank God for calling us to be disciples together in the fellowship of this church. As you grow with us in knowledge and in faith, we promise to hold you in prayer, continue to learn with you, and serve alongside you as your brothers and**

sisters in Christ. Together we will journey, seeking to be shaped by God's love, transformed by Christ's grace, and led by God's Spirit into deeper faithfulness. Amen.

Assessment

Overall, the Bible study offered was well received. In a follow-up survey given at the end of the course, participants had clearly internalized the broader understanding of baptism as a triply-enacted sign. The language used to describe God's work in baptism was, for example, much richer and clearer than in the first survey. While before the course 36 percent of respondents had been unable to articulate God's role in baptism only three percent struggled to answer the question at the end of the class. The answers given in the final survey spoke broadly about the Spirit's indwelling and inspiration, the salvific work of grace, invitation and acceptance, and guidance and nurture. The community's work in baptism was also more strongly highlighted. Whereas seven percent of respondents had been unsure how to articulate the community's role in the first survey, every respondent was able to answer in some way by the end of the course. Answers continued to speak about support, nurture, welcome, and affirmation.

Interestingly, the restrictions on who ought to be baptized were loosened in the final survey as well. The "qualifications" for baptism were not restricted to a certain age or to an ability to express or articulate belief as they were in the first survey. Instead, for most participants, baptism was understood to be withheld only from those who did not wish to be baptized or who did not desire to be in a relationship with God.[52]

[52] To see the change in responses from the presurvey to the final survey, please see the tables in Appendix A.

As we progressed through the study, it was clear that most participants had previously viewed baptism as the result of an individual's decision to join or become part of a church. Though baptism hinged on a person's belief, however, the definition of that belief was vague. At first, most discussions about baptism were founded on a particular person's experience of the practice. It became obvious that for the theological framework around baptism to be strengthened, the practice itself must be more deeply understood. It would not be enough to simply hand the class a new theology of baptism. Instead, the congregational practices of baptism would need to shift and deepen if the theological underpinnings were to change.

Craig Dykstra notes "After a time, the primary point about the practices [of the church] is no longer that they are something we do. Instead, they become arenas in which something is done to us, in us, and through us that we could not of ourselves do, that is beyond what we do."[53] By paying attention to the practice of baptism itself, the congregation was able to make sense of its theological convictions. Referencing anthropologist Catherine Bell, Dru Johnson notes that often Westerners understand rituals as a way to symbolize belief. Yet rituals are not simply "actions-expressing-thought."[54] Instead, rituals actually shape knowledge. He writes, "any attempt at a sacramental theology that regards the authority of Scripture must reckon with this principle: we practice rites to know. Moreover, it is not that rituals imbue knowledge. Rather, human

[53] Craig Dykstra, *Growing in the Life of Faith: Education and Christian Practices*, Second Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 56.

[54] Dru Johnson, *Scripture's Knowing: A Companion to Biblical Epistemology* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), 70.

knowing is ritualed, inaugurated in embodied practices and extended through the skilled discernment within a community."[55]

By studying the baptismal practices of their congregation, the class was able to articulate a stronger and deeper theological understanding of what was occurring in and around baptism. Through the creation of a new congregational liturgy of affirmation and welcome at the time of baptism, the participants were able to reshape their practices in light of their new understandings. Yet it is my hope that these reshaped practices will, in turn, continue to deepen the congregation's theological framework for baptism in the days to come.

In reflecting on the course, it seems clear that added depth would have come from including at least one other Scriptural depiction of baptism in the book of Acts—that of Lydia and her household in Acts 16:11-15. In this short account Lydia, a rich businesswoman, enthusiastically listened to Paul and decided to be baptized. And yet it was not only Lydia that was baptized but also her entire household. Perhaps the entire household made individual decisions to be baptized. Perhaps it was enough to be carried into the faith by Lydia herself. The Biblical account is unclear. Yet it serves as a provocative counter-narrative to the hyper-individualized accounts of baptism in other parts of Acts.

It points, as well, to the larger work of a believing community not only to nurture and carry others into faith but also to be willing to accept the hospitality offered by those who join with them. After her baptism, Lydia opens her home to those who have brought her into faith. Jennings writes, "Lydia's heart has been opened by the Spirit, and she will

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[55] Dru Johnson, *Knowledge by Ritual: A Biblical Prolegomenon to Sacramental Theology*, Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements 13 (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 268.

follow a pattern similar to Cornelius: she and her household will be baptized, and she will draw the disciples into her home...She makes her home a site of the new intimacy of the Spirit and forms it into what will become a cell of the church."[56] Interestingly, it seems that Paul is also changed by this encounter. While hesitant at first to accept Lydia's hospitality, later in the chapter he returns to her home, calling those there brothers and sisters. As John Gillman notes, "By accepting her offer of hospitality, Paul too is presented as moving in a new direction…Barriers begin to dissolve."[57] Similarly, congregations are changed and shaped by those who are incorporated into their membership as each share and offer gifts to one another.

That was, of course, the experience of First Baptist. Billy not only forced the congregation to rethink baptism for him, but also for the congregation as a whole. The things necessary for guiding Billy into faith—nurture, affirmation, and instruction—continue to be the same elements necessary for every person who is baptized in the church. Though Billy's impairments are more readily recognized by society, they reflected, for First Baptist, the ways that each of us is impaired in our understandings of the faith God gives us. Over the course of the study Billy shifted from being an exception that the congregation should learn how to accommodate to becoming yet another example and reminder of what it looks like for all Christians to journey authentically into ever-deepening faith.

On the evening that the class watched television and film depictions of baptisms, our youth and children stayed for the class. Billy also chose to stay. As I turned on the clip from *The Lion King*, I smiled, knowing that it was one of Billy's favorite movies.

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[56] Jennings, *Acts*, 158.
[57] John Gillman, "Hospitality in Acts 16," *Louvain Studies* 17, no. 2–3, Summer–Fall (1992): 190.

Though I hadn't planned the class around his presence, I knew he would be pleasantly surprised. His entire demeanor lit up as we watched it together as a class. When I asked the participants how the clip depicted baptism, Billy raised his hand. "Well, Simba was a new member of the family and they all celebrated," he said. "And when you are baptized, you are part of a church family. Just like I was adopted into the Smith family, I also have a church family too!" The entire class began to clap, recognizing that Billy had said something profound not only about baptism but about the church. Billy understood what it meant to be a stranger, not only as someone living with intellectual disabilities but also as someone who lived in foster care and was then adopted. Through his experiences and his insight, Billy helped the congregation reflect on its role in welcoming one another, previously strangers, but now all members of God's family—children of God.

Conclusion

It is my hope that this study can give birth to more inclusive resources that can be replicated and used by baptismal candidates at First Baptist in the days to come. These resources would not only be helpful to any considering baptism but will also intentionally address the particular needs of those with intellectual disabilities and their caregivers as they consider how to respond in faith to God's movement and grace in their lives. I foresee that this workbook can be tailored for those of all ages and abilities so that those who are younger or who need extra assistance might work through the exercises and reflections with a mentor or parent.

Those who participated in the study requested that elements of it be offered on an annual basis as a break-out Sunday school class for those who are interested in being baptized or understanding the significance of their baptism. In addition to the annual

class, deacons and other lay leaders who have taken the class will be invited to serve as mentors for new members participating in the class or those who are considering baptism.

Of particular interest to me is the way that congregational practices can reflect and, in fact, reform, a congregation's theology. By moving into deeper understandings of the significance of its practices, a congregation is also able to discern more clearly the theological claims those practices enact. Ultimately, these practices shape a congregation's faith so that they are able to respond in faithful ways when confronted with challenges to their perceived notions of normalcy.

This has been true in First Baptist's response to the challenge of intellectual disability. By shifting away from an emphasis on the individual's belief to the work and movement of God within the larger practices of the church, the congregation was able to create new spaces for welcome and inclusion for Billy and for anyone else who wished to join their community of faith. First Baptist has learned that as a congregation invites others to join them in the life of faith, they also commit to supporting and guiding these new members more deeply into faith. At the core of this work is the affirmation that all humans are loved and gifted by God in unique and particular ways. The church, therefore, becomes a place that celebrates that diversity even as it is united by God's love, mercy, and grace. Baptism becomes another locus of celebration and praise. Rather than acting as a rigid boundary marker, it becomes a site of identity formation, not only for the individual, but also for the congregation as a whole.

Appendix A

This is a summary of the responses from both the presurvey and the final survey conducted before and after the Baptism Bible Study. The percent of change between the two surveys is indicated in the last column of each table.

Question 1: Appropriate Age for Baptism

	Initial Survey	%	Final Survey	%	% Change
No Age	10	21%	14	47%	54%
Old enough to understand	19	40%	7	23%	-73%
Old enough to express belief	2	4%	1	3%	-28%
8 or older	4	9%	0	0%	-100%
12 or over	10	21%	0	0%	-100%
Infant followed by confirmation	2	4%	0	0%	-100%
Believe	0	0%	8	27%	100%
All Answers	47		30		

Question 2: Prerequisites for Baptism

	Initial Survey	%	Final Survey	%	% Change
Talk with Pastor/Elder	17	32%	2	8%	-285%
Accept Jesus	23	43%	17	71%	39%
Public Confession	8	15%	5	21%	28%
Understand meaning of Baptism	5	9%	0	0%	-100%
All Answers	53		24		

Question 3: Baptism Should Exclude

	Initial Survey	%	Final Survey	%	% Change
None	3	6%	3	12%	48%
Those who don't understand	6	13%	1	4%	-213%
Following the Crowd	3	6%	0	0%	-100%
Don't want to change their lives	11	23%	0	0%	-100%
Unbelievers	25	52%	21	84%	38%
All Answers	48		25		

Question 4: Baptism Symbolizes/Signifies

	Initial Survey	%	Final Survey	%	% Change
Grace	1	2%	1	4%	56%
Cleansing of sin	2	4%	1	4%	13%
Death and resurrection/New Life	19	35%	16	67%	48%
Outward expression of inward change	16	29%	6	25%	-16%
Belief	16	29%	0	0%	-100%
Church Membership	1	2%	0	0%	-100%
All Answers	55		24		

Question 5: Role of God in Baptism

	Initial Survey	%	Final Survey	%	% Change
N/A or Unsure	16	36%	1	3%	-1002%
Inspiration/Indwelling	13	29%	12	39%	25%
Grace/Salvation	8	18%	8	26%	31%
Teaching or guidance	8	18%	4	13%	-100%
Invitation or Acceptance	0	0%	6	19%	100%
All Answers	45		31		

Question 6: Role of Congregation in Baptism

	Initial Survey	%	Final Survey	%	% Change
N/A or Unsure	4	7%	0	0%	-100%
Support	28	51%	17	40%	-26%
Nurture/Teach	13	24%	12	29%	17%
Welcome/Affirm	6	11%	10	24%	54%
Witness	4	7%	3	7%	-2%
All Answers	55		42		

Appendix B

This is a summary of each session of the Baptism Bible Study Curriculum offered at First Baptist Church, Winchester, Virginia in the fall of 2017.

Session One: Come to the Waters

Before the first session began, participants were asked to complete a presurvey about their understanding of baptism. At the beginning of the first class, the class was introduced to the varieties of baptismal experience by participating in a "human scavenger hunt," finding members of the class who had experienced baptism in various ways, such as being baptized in a river or creek, being baptized as babies, or being baptized more than one time.

It was important for the class to recognize how these varied practices of baptism were rooted in the multivalent symbolism of water and baptism in Scripture itself. So, for the first three sessions of the class, using Scripture as its guide, the class dug into the many ways that water is understood and utilized in the Bible.

In the first session, the class was asked to name the various ways that water is used in daily life. After recognizing the various ways water is used, the class turned to Scripture. Using butcher paper, the class worked in groups to name as many different Biblical allusions to or stories about water as possible. Sharing the compiled lists of stories and allusions, the class then was challenged to think of which stories had been overlooked. The class was challenged to think about how water might be understood as a metaphor rather than just a plot device in the various stories and allusions they had named.

Session Two: Water as Danger and Deliverance

Noting that the stories the class had listed in session one spanned the various parts of Scripture, the group was challenged to identify themes that emerged from those stories. Stories of water permeate the larger narrative of God's salvific work in the world. The class identified the ways that water was used to depict chaos and creation, danger and deliverance, and boundaries marking a change in way of life or identity.

The class was asked to recognize how water is understood both as a source of danger and a source of life. On the board they listed ways that water was dangerous in our own time and ways that water was necessary. They were then asked to consider how baptism might be understood as dangerous or life-threatening as well.

Breaking into small groups, the class explored the stories of Jesus calming the storm at sea, Naaman being healed, and the Israelites crossing the Red Sea and the Jordan River. They were asked to consider how baptism might also symbolize God's rule over the forces of chaos or danger in our lives, healing and restoration, and the movement from one life to the next.

Reading Romans 6:1-11, the class was invited to consider how baptism symbolizes the move from one life to the next. This old life was, in fact, life threatening. Water acts in baptism as a boundary marker and a site for deliverance, freedom, and new life.

The class was asked to think about how our baptismal practices symbolize this shift or change, naming not only the water but also the white robes, the imposition of salt, and the gift of a lighted candle.

Session Three: *Water as Commissioning*

In session three the class continued to explore how baptism acts as a boundary marker from one life to the next. Instead of focusing on the danger of the old ways of life, however, in this session, the class was asked to focus on the gift of a new identity. To begin, the class performed the story of the Samaritan woman at the well from John 4:1-42 as a reader's theater. Following the dramatic rendering, the class was asked to name how the woman's encounter with Jesus was dangerous. They were then asked to name how the encounter represented a new beginning for the Samaritan woman. The class was asked to consider how the story acted as a commissioning narrative.

The class then turned to the depictions of Jesus' own baptism. They were asked to discuss why Jesus comes to be baptized, what occurs at his baptism, and what Jesus' baptism has to do with our own. If Jesus did not come to the waters of baptism to seek salvation, why did he come? The class was asked to consider how this event acts as a turning point in Jesus' life as he moves into public ministry.

Finally, the class was asked to read the story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet in John 13:1-17. They were asked to discuss why Jesus washes their feet, how this action gestures towards Jesus' own expectations for his followers, and what this event has to do with our practices or understanding of baptism. How was this act a commissioning event for Jesus' disciples?

At the end of the class, the various themes of water and baptism that had been studied so far were summarized: baptism as healing, baptism as a washing away of sins, baptism as a sign of a new identity, and baptism as a commissioning into ministry.

Session Four: Baptized in the Spirit

The fourth session began with the class singing the hymn "Baptized in Water" as we moved into the next section of the study, focusing on the ways baptism was understood and practiced in the early church. In the fourth session, the class turned to depictions of the Holy Spirit and the way that Scripture speaks of the Spirit's work in incorporating an individual into a believing community. The class was asked to name the various symbols of the Holy Spirit that are most commonly used in Scripture—the dove, wind, fire—and then name the places in which those images are used, such as the flood narrative, Jesus' baptism, and Pentecost. Mining those images for their metaphorical value, the class was asked to brainstorm what each symbol brought to mind.

The class was then asked to connect each symbol with baptism. Using Robin M. Jensen's book *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions*, the class was led into a discussion of early baptismal practices and imagery that utilized these symbols. The class was challenged to again think about its own baptismal practices, thinking about the meaning behind the white baptismal robes, the candles the new members are given, and the salt placed on their lips. They were invited to read through the baptismal hymns that are typically sung, naming the ways the Spirit is mentioned or understood in the hymns.

The class then turned to the story of the creation of the first church at Pentecost, focusing on the work of the Spirit in that narrative. Next, the class explored the fruits of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22ff. The class was asked to consider how those who are baptized continue to be shaped by the Spirit, both before and after baptism.

Finally, the class considered how the Spirit works to form a new community, reading Galatians 3:26-28, Colossians 2:8-15, and Colossians 3:1-17. The class was

asked to consider how we typically organize people into categories and groups. They were then asked to consider how, in these depictions of the early church, baptism becomes the primary identity marker for the new Christian, replacing the other identities of the past. The boundaries recognized by society are rendered meaningless in the waters of baptism in light of the uniting work of Christ and the Spirit.

Session Five: Different Forms of Baptism Today

Moving from the early church, the class then turned to more modern-day understandings of baptism. Using clips from *Nacho Libre, All in the Family, The Lion King, and O, Brother Where Art Thou?,* the class was asked to consider how each film or television example depicted baptism. After each clip, the class was asked to name what seemed strange about the baptism, what seemed joyful about the baptism, what the baptism was accomplishing, and how the baptism depicted was like or unlike the baptisms in our church.

Some of the baptisms depicted omitted consent from the individual. Some baptisms took place without the support of a believing community. The class argued that baptisms needed to be founded on an experience of God expressed or claimed by an individual. Similarly, the baptisms ought to take place while surrounded by a believing community. The class was asked to consider how various traditions emphasize one "actor" in baptism over other "actors," whether it be God, the community, or the individual. Each table was asked to explain the danger in emphasizing one "actor" over the rest.

Session Six: Believer's Baptism and God's Work

In the sixth session, the class turned to an exploration of believer's baptism. First, Baptist practices of baptism were compared and contrasted with other denominational practices. The class was asked to think about how they were the same and how they were different. Each table was asked to name why baptism is important to our tradition. They were asked to list other commitments we make in public. Finally, the notion of a "performative sign" was introduced—the notion that this is an outward and visible sign or an inward and spiritual change.

Turning to Acts 8:26-40 the class was invited to consider how God was working in the narrative, how the community was working in the narrative, and how the individual was working in the story. They were asked to name the barriers the Ethiopian eunuch faced. They were then asked to meditate on the eunuch's question: "What prevents me from being baptized?"

Moving from the story, the class was then asked to brainstorm what we believe would prevent someone from being baptized. They were invited to think about baptism as a job someone was applying to—what would be the requirements? Working at their tables they came up with a job description for baptism and shared with the larger group.

The class was then asked to imagine what it would mean if baptism was not something we earned or achieved but instead something we received. What if baptism is a response to an invitation that God has extended? The class then read the parable of the great banquet in Luke 14:15-24. The class was asked to think about the role of God, the role of the community, and the role of the individual in the parable. Who was invited? Who was uninvited?

The class then considered how we, as a congregation, were to respond to the issue of intellectual disability. If we stress the work of the individual in baptism to the detriment of God's work, perhaps we are missing an important component of what baptism is truly about. The class was asked to reflect on when they felt they completely understood salvation or God. They were asked to name the age at which they understood baptism entirely.

The class closed by singing the hymn, "Come to the Water."

Session Seven: The Community in Baptism

At the beginning of the seventh session, the class was invited to fill out the survey they had taken at the beginning of the course. After reviewing where the class had been, the session turned to the work of the community in baptism. The class began by reading the great commission in Matthew 28:16-20. The class was asked where Jesus asked his disciples to go, what Jesus asked his disciples to do, and how the disciples were to accomplish that work.

The class then turned to various baptismal narratives in the book of Acts. Beginning with Acts 10:19-48, the story of Peter and Cornelius, the class was asked to think about how Peter might be living out the Great Commission. Each table was asked to consider what Peter did when he met Cornelius, why Peter might have had reservations about baptizing Cornelius, and how he overcame those reservations.

Next, the class read Acts 22:1-16, the story of Paul's conversion. They class was asked to discuss how Paul experienced conversion, Jesus' role in the conversion, Ananias' role in the conversion, and how Ananias lived out the Great Commission. The class was then asked what we knew about Paul following his conversion. The work of

the church in these narratives is to baptize and to teach. The class was asked to consider what the church's role is before and after baptism today.

At their tables, the class was asked to discuss the following questions:

-At baptism, when an individual responds in faith, what promises are being made in his or her covenant with God? (What is God promising? What is the individual promising?)

-When the individual is baptized, what promises are being made in the covenant with the congregation? (What is the individual promising? What is the congregation promising?)

The class was asked to consider whether the role of the congregation changes or shifts depending on the individual. How does the congregation fulfill its commission to teach and baptize today?

Session Eight: A New Baptismal Liturgy

At their tables, the class was asked to list the Biblical stories about water or baptism that spoke most deeply to them over the course of the study. Sharing how wide-ranging the significance of the stories was, the class was asked to consider how their understanding of baptism has shifted and changed. Just as the stories depict different parts of God's salvation history, water and baptism can symbolize many different things at once. The tables were asked to list the symbolic meaning of baptism that seemed most important to them over the course of the study.

At their tables, the class was then asked to list all the verbs that come to mind when they think about what God is doing at baptism, what the individual is doing at baptism, and what the church is doing at baptism.

The class was then asked to work together to act out the congregation's current baptismal liturgy and practice. After each table shared, the class was asked to name what

was missing in the liturgy. Each part of the practice was dissected and the meaning behind it explained.

Next, each individual was invited to write a letter to an imaginary baptismal candidate. Before doing so, they were asked to consider: What do you want the baptismal candidate to know? How do you want the baptismal candidate to feel? What are you promising, as a church member, to do for the candidate?

Finally, the symbols, verbs, and letters were compiled into a congregational response to baptism at each table and then shared with the larger group, edited to one final liturgy of response to be used at baptisms.

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