



BAPTISM AND EPIPHANY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Testimonies: Two Baptismal Stories

1. As a small child growing up in the South, I recall that my father, a Baptist minister, pastored the Friendship and Zion Memorial Baptist Churches in my hometown of Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In between those pastorates, he served as Dean of the Forsythe County Baptist Fellowship, assisting various churches with the development of their Christian Education programs. In that capacity, he also directed a Christian summer camp program for children and youth called Camp Civitan. I used to enjoy going to Camp Civitan with all of the other children and participating in the educational, recreational, and religious activities designed to enhance our mental, physical, and spiritual development.

At the end of the week, on the last night of camp, the experience culminated with a closing worship service that included singing, praying, preaching, and an invitation to discipleship, or what we in the black church call “opening the doors of the church.” On one such night, not long after my father had resigned the Fellowship to pastor Zion Memorial, the new camp director, a Rev. Dudley, extended the invitation. Before I knew it, a strong and irresistible urge propelled me out of my seat and down the aisle as I gave my life to Jesus Christ. Even though I was only seven years old, I knew that I wanted to follow Jesus and live my life in a way that would be pleasing to God. After wading into the water of the baptismal pool at Zion Memorial Baptist Church on the Sunday of my baptism, I was overjoyed, not only because I had given my life to Jesus, but also because I had been blessed by being baptized by my dad. I will never forget that day.

2. Shortly after I became senior pastor of the Covenant Baptist Church in Washington, DC in the mid-1980s, a single young woman with two small children joined our church as a candidate for baptism. Soon thereafter, I discovered that she was living with a malady about which there was little factual information, but a plethora of myths and rumors. This new disorder was called HIV/AIDS. In counseling her, I learned that she had contracted the virus/disease through intravenous drug use. She did not try to hide her ailment as my wife and I sought to set an example for others by ministering to her with unconditional love and compassion. The members of our congregation quickly caught on and they, too, showered her and her children with love and affection by providing them with food, clothing, transportation, and financial assistance. As the time for her baptism drew near, I became increasingly aware that there were many unanswered questions about the dreaded affliction that had possessed her body: Was it contagious? Could it be spread through casual contact? Could it be contracted through sharing a common object, occupying common air space, or standing in common water? In retrospect, these fears seem almost comical, but at a time when so little was known about this deadly plague, no one was laughing. Due to our ignorance, baptizing her appeared to involve some risks. But all I knew was that she was a child of God who deserved the same dignity, consideration, and respect as any other child of God. So I baptized her. And when I remember the joy on her face as she emerged from that water as a new creation in Christ, I am so glad I did! Not long afterwards, she died in the flesh, but I am ever comforted by the blessed assurance that she lives on in the Spirit, forever.

II. Words – Etymology: Two Significant Words

1. The word *baptism* (as well as *baptize*) is derived from the Greek word *baptizo*, which means “to dip, plunge, immerse, or bury in water.”¹ In the Christian church, it refers to the ritual act of welcoming and/or initiating a new convert into the body of Christ through the administration of water in a form deemed fitting and appropriate according to the tradition and custom of the particular denomination or local congregation involved. While most denominations agree that baptism is the liturgical means by which new members enter into the fellowship of the church, there is widespread, and sometimes contentious, disagreement concerning the appropriate method of baptism, the efficacy of baptism, and the question of infant baptism.

The three primary methods of baptism are immersion (placing one in water--fully or partially), pouring, and sprinkling. The efficacy of baptism is still for many the question: What does it actually *do* or *mean* for the recipient? Some faith communions believe not only that baptism is a *sacrament* or *sign* of God's saving grace, but that the act of baptism itself participates in the saving and regenerative power to which it points. Other faith communions interpret baptism as an *ordinance* of the church, i.e., an authoritative, pedagogical, and commemorative rite instituted by Jesus Christ and representing an outward symbol of an inward reality. Baptism may, therefore, (a) show forth the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ; (b) manifest one's own death to sin and rebirth as a new creation in Christ; and, (c) demonstrate the purification and washing away of one's old life of disobedience and alienation from God, and "putting on" Jesus Christ as one's brand new garment of salvation and liberation. Finally, the debate over infant baptism has to do with issues of conversion, maturity, and agency. Essentially, the question is whether the efficacy of baptism can be transmitted from one individual to another (e.g., from a parent to an infant), or does it require that the recipient of baptism be old enough and mature enough to make one's own decision to follow Jesus Christ based on one's personal conversion experience.

These are just some of the issues that challenge the Christian Church in its quest to be faithful to the original intent of Jesus Christ in establishing the institution of baptism as a public expression of the rebirth of the newly converted believer.

2. The word *Epiphany* (with a capital "E") refers to a Christian festival celebrated on the 6th day of January, twelve days after the observance of the birth of Jesus, commemorating the manifestation of the divinity of Jesus to the Gentiles, as represented by the Magi or the Wise Men. Generally speaking, an epiphany (with a small "e") has to do with the revelatory manifestation of a divine being. It can also refer to a sudden, intuitive awareness or revelation of something that had previously gone unnoticed or undetected, often prompted by an ordinary, unremarkable event or experience. It is derived from the Greek word, *epiphanies*, which means "manifestation" or "a showing forth."² Whereas *Epiphany* concerns the birth of Jesus and *baptism* involves the rebirth of his disciples, these terms will be considered in conjunction with each other for the purposes of this cultural resource unit.

III. Historical Information Related to the Moment

A. The Biblical Context

In Galatians 3:26-28, the apostle Paul declares:

... for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. 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.³

Many scholars believe that this baptismal confession may have predated Paul and possibly emerged in response to the following three-fold prayer that Jewish males used to pray every morning: "Lord, I thank you that I am not a Gentile, a slave, or a woman."⁴ If the confession is indeed a rejoinder to the prayer, then the baptismal confession was clearly intended to suggest

that the ethnic, class, and gender divisions implied in the prayer had been abolished through Jesus Christ.⁵ It affirms that just as Jesus was not *born* to maintain the status quo, neither have believers been *reborn* to maintain it. Instead, we who believe in Jesus Christ, *with our reborn selves*, have been called to fight with him to “trouble” the world, to turn it upside down, to shake things up, to level the playing field, and to break down the human-made barriers between Jew and Gentile, between slave and free, and between male and female because we are all “one in Christ Jesus.” This fighting spirit explains why when we sing the spiritual, “I Will Trust in the Lord,” one of the verses proclaims:

I'm going to stay on the battlefield,
I'm going to stay on the battlefield,
I'm going to stay on the battlefield
Till I die. (Repeat)⁶

In addition to “staying on the battlefield” and fighting injustice, we have also been reborn to “do a new thing” because “the [former] things have passed away.” This new thing indicates that baptism has both individual and social consequences. It is not just an expression of personal *believing*—it is also a demonstration of communal *belonging*. As Brad Braxton reminds us:

In baptism, believers bury their former lives that were dominated by sin. Baptism also has significant communal dimensions. Baptism into Christ establishes a relationship of belonging. Believers belong to Christ and to the community of Christ. Consequently, believers must be mindful of their behaviors toward one another.⁷

Hence, another verse of “I Will Trust in the Lord,” declares:

I'm going to treat everybody right,
I'm going to treat everybody right,
I'm going to treat everybody right
Till I die.⁸

B. The African American Context

When we think about the power of baptism to break down walls of division, it is revealing to recall that when our African ancestors were first brought to this country as slaves, beginning in 1619, they were denied the rite of baptism because their captors were afraid that slave baptisms would necessitate slave emancipation. Aside from this, another fear was that the Christianization of the slaves would render them uncontrollable and, thereby, disrupt their “economic profitability.”⁹ Slave owners “risked losing their property and investment, not to mention cheap labor, if their slaves were baptized.”¹⁰ Thus, slave masters came up with elaborate rationales for withholding baptism from the slaves, including the claim that slaves had no souls. This absurd notion “was resolved by deciding that the slaves had a soul, but it was of a lower nature.”¹¹ Another argument was that slaves lacked the ability to learn. These excuses continued until the colonies passed laws similar to the following statute passed by the Virginia legislature in 1667:

The conferring of baptism doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedome.¹²

In 1701, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG) was established by England for the purpose of evangelizing the slaves in colonial America. Ironically, instead of simply arguing that baptism did not *free* the slaves, some “Christian” slave masters now contended that baptism made them *better* slaves. This sentiment was supported by the following letter sent in 1727 from the Bishop of London “To the Masters and Mistresses of Families in the English Plantations Abroad:”

Christianity, and the embracing of the Gospel, does not make the least Alteration in Civil Property or in any of the Duties which belong to Civil Relations; but in all these Respects, it continues Persons just in the same State as it found them. The Freedom which Christianity gives, is a Freedom from the Bondage of Sin and Satan, and from the Dominion of Men’s Lusts and Passions and inordinate Desires; but as to their *outward* Condition, whatever that was before, whether bond or free, their being baptized, and becoming Christians, makes no manner of Change in it. . . . And so far is Christianity from discharging Men from the Duties of the Station and Condition in which it found them, that it lays them under stronger Obligations to perform those Duties with the greatest Diligence and Fidelity.¹³

While the SPG had limited success, it paved the way for the Great Awakening, a revivalist movement characterized by religious fervor and an emphasis on personal conversion that swept across America in the 1740s *and* 1750s. One observer aptly summarizes the impact of the Great Awakening on black people:

Through its unconventional revivals, its challenge to social norms, and its appeal to the lower and middle classes, it encouraged alienated blacks to believe that society was on the verge of a major transformation that would hasten their liberation.

The period that the Great Awakening ushered in has been referred to as one that offered ‘Christianity for All,’ implying that the movement comprehended members of different racial, ethnic and social groups.¹⁴

This “Christianity for All” description is reminiscent of the eradication of social distinctions implied in the baptismal confession of Galatians 3:28—“for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” However, we must be mindful that, although the Great Awakening helped develop “a social consciousness against slavery,”¹⁵ it was not a social justice movement. Its “primary task was to inspire conversion, not social criticism But the very nature (and, I would add, *composition*) of the meetings implied a rejection of traditional religious and social conventions.”¹⁶

One of the most overlooked consequences of the Great Awakening was the fact that it ended the debate over whether or not black people had souls.¹⁷ The irony is that even this belated revelation was used in the following baptismal “covenant of consent” to bolster slavery rather than to abolish it:

You declare in the presence of God and the Congregation that you do not ask for the Holy Baptism out of any design to free yourself from the duty and obedience you owe to

your master while you live, but merely for the good of your soul and to partake of the graces and blessings promised to the members of the church of Jesus Christ.¹⁸

This reactionary covenant reveals that, when it came to acknowledging the humanity of black slaves, white slave masters obviously slept through the Great Awakening. Nonetheless, Henry Mitchell detects the hand of God turning this negative into a positive:

The culture of the Great Awakening was used by God not so much to ‘save’ thousands as to legitimate . . . African ways of expressing the Christian faith, which [enslaved Africans] had already independently begun to seek and interpret for themselves.¹⁹

For instance, despite the negative spin that white slave masters tried to place on black baptism, this ritual has always been a powerful experience in the lives of people of African descent. Quiet as it is kept, our fascination with water rituals did not begin in slavery. Melva Wilson Costen talks at length about how, for African adults and children, Christian baptismal waters “evoked memories of the symbolic use of water dominant in the African world view.”²⁰ She also explains the close African connection between God and water:

In many African societies, large bodies of water, rain, and waterfalls are evidence of God’s continual creation and, therefore, sacred places where God meets humanity. . . . Rain, originating from above, links humanity with the divine.²¹

Melville Herskovits argues that the popularity of the Baptist Church among the slaves had to do with “baptism by total immersion,” reminiscent of the river cults of West Africa.²² According to Albert J. Raboteau:

Baptism, the central Christian symbol of spiritual death, rebirth, and initiation was a memorable occasion for the slaves. Accompanied by song, shouting, and ecstatic behavior, baptism—especially for Baptists—was perhaps the most dramatic ritual in the slave’s religious life.²³

The drama and excitement of baptism is vividly captured in the following account:

‘De biggest meetin’ house crowds was when dey had baptizin’,’ noted a former Georgia slave. ‘Dey dammed up de crick on Saddy so as it would be deep enough on Sunday . . . At dem baptizin’s dere was all sorts of shoutin’, and dey would sing *Roll, Jordan, Roll, De Livin’ Waters*, and *Lord, I’s Comin’ Home*.’ Dressed in white robes and attended by the ‘brothers and sisters,’ the candidates proceeded ‘amidst singing and praises’ to the local pond or creek, symbol of the river Jordan, where, according to Baptist practice, each was ‘ducked’ [dunked] by the preacher. Sometimes the newly regenerate came up from the baptismal waters shouting for joy at being made new in the Lord.’²⁴

Gwendolin Sims Warren informs us that some slaves were “secret Baptists:”

Many who lived on a Roman Catholic or Methodist plantation, like Elizabeth Ross Hite, were secret Baptists. ‘See, our master didn’t like us to have too much ‘ligion, said it made

us lag in our work,' Elizabeth recalled. 'He jest wanted us to be Catholics on Sunday . . . didn't want us shoutin' and moanin' all day long, but you gotta shout and moan if you wants to be saved.'²⁵

This kind of deception was often incorporated by the slaves in order to pursue their freedom while pretending to be content with their bondage. For instance, the familiar baptismal song, "Wade in the Water," traditionally includes the following verses:

1. See that host all dressed in white, God's gonna trouble the water.
The leader looks like the Israelite [John the Baptist], God's . . .
2. See that band all dressed in red, God's . . .
Looks like the band that Moses led, God's . . .
3. If you don't believe I've been redeemed, God's . . .
Just follow me down to the Jordan's stream, God's . . .

Chorus: Wade in the water, wade in the water children,
Wade in the water, God's gonna trouble the water.²⁶

Although this song was intended for one purpose, it was not unusual for it to be "used secretly for other, masked purposes." This song was created to accompany the rite of baptism, but Harriet Tubman used it to communicate to fugitives escaping to the North that they should be sure to "wade in the water" in order to throw bloodhounds off their scent. An improvised version of this song when it was used for this purpose was:

Jordan's water is chilly and cold,
God's going to trouble the water,
It chills the body but lifts the soul,
God's going to trouble the water.

Wade in the water,
Wade in the water, children.
Wade in the water.

If you get there before I do,
God's going to trouble the water,
Tell all my friends I'm comin' too . . .

Tubman's and others' improvisations on already existing spirituals, employing them clandestinely in the multilayered struggle for freedom, were repeated at many times and places.²⁷

Other songs traditionally used in the baptismal services of the black church include "Certainly Lord"²⁸ and "Take Me to the Water."²⁹ Songs used for Epiphany include "Behold the Star," "Jesus, the Light of the World," "Shine On Me," and "What Child Is This."³⁰

Notes

1. Hiscox, Edward T. The New Directory for Baptist Churches. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1978. pp. 119-130.
2. See “Epiphany.” Dictionary.com Unabridged (v1.1). Random House, Inc. Online location: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/epiphany>, accessed 30 September 2008.
3. Galatians 3:26-28. New Revised Standard Version.
4. World Bible Publishers, and Tyndale House Publishers. Life Application Bible: New Revised Standard Version. Iowa Falls, IA: World Bible Publishers, 1990. p. 2056, n. 3.28.
5. See, Braxton, Brad R. No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience. Collegeville, MN, 2002. p. 93.
6. “I Will Trust in the Lord.” African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Publications, Inc., 2001. p. 391.
7. Braxton, Brad R. Preaching Paul. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004. p. 184, n. 7.
8. “I Will Trust in the Lord.” African American Heritage Hymnal. #391
9. See, Raboteau, Albert J. Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1978. p. 98.
10. Hood, Robert E. Begrimed and Black: Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994. p. 146.
11. McCall, Emmanuel L. Black Church Life-Styles: Rediscovering the Black Christian Experience. Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1986. p. 21.
12. Hopkins, Dwight N. Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000. p. 22.
13. Black Church Life-Styles: Rediscovering the Black Christian Experience. p. 26.
14. George, Carol V. R. Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1973. p. 15.
15. Black Church Life-Styles: Rediscovering the Black Christian Experience. p. 28.
16. Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches. p. 14.
17. Black Church Life-Styles: Rediscovering the Black Christian Experience. p. 24.
18. Earl, Jr., Riggins R. Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind. Maryknoll, NY, 1993. p. 44.
19. Mitchell, Henry H. Black Church Beginnings: The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004. p. 40.
20. Costen, Melva Wilson. African American Christian Worship. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993. p. 59.
21. Ibid.
22. Herskovits, Melville J. The Myth of the Negro Past. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1958. p. 232.
23. Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South. p. 227.
24. Ibid.
25. Warren, Gwendolin Sims. Ev’ry Time I Feel the Spirit: 101 Best-Loved Psalms, Gospel Hymns, and Spiritual Songs of The African-American Church. New York, NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1997. p. 93.
26. “Wade in the Water.” African American Heritage Hymnal. #676
27. Jones, Arthur C. Wade in the Water: The Wisdom of the Spirituals. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993. pp. 50-51.

28. "Certainly Lord." African American Heritage Hymnal. #678. Also see, background on this song in McClain, William B. Come Sunday: The Liturgy of Zion. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990. #120 and #161
29. "Take Me to the Water." African American Heritage Hymnal. #675
30. "Behold the Star," "Jesus, the Light of the World," "Shine On Me," and "What Child is This." African American Heritage Hymnal. #216, #217, #527, and #220