

“Holy...as in Holy Baptism” (fn.:EPHESIANS 4 4-5.2017.DOC)

Scripture: Ephesians 4:4-5

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Our worship theme for the past several Sundays has been the meaning of the word “holy” for us. We began with “holy” as an attribute or characteristic of God. Last Sunday, we addressed the “Holy Bible.” This week is “Holy Baptism.” Again, the word “holy” basically means what sets us apart, what makes us distinctive. And certainly baptism is a distinctive marker of the church. Except for a few denominations, baptism is a universal practice among churches.

For our Scripture, we will look at two verses in Ephesians, where the apostle declares what is universally accepted:

Ephesians 4:4-5: ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism...is there one baptism? Let’s see: today the Presbyterians have infant baptism with sprinkling; the Baptists only have believer-baptism with full immersion; Quakers and Salvation Army (there are Salvation Army congregations in addition to the mission outreach that you may know)—these congregations do not have baptisms at all. One baptism...is there one?

And of course, as to one baptism, no one does baptism the “old-fashioned way.” One of the earliest accounts about the process of baptism in the early church went like this: first, the children, then the men, and then the women lined up for baptism on a set date. Why the separation? Because you were all baptized in the nude. (The baptism did take place before dawn, so there was some darkness for modesty.) You put your off your old garments; you were baptized in your “birthday suit;” you were given a new, white robe to symbolize victory, and you were given a mixture of milk and honey...because you had entered the “Promise Land” that is described in the Old Testament as a “land flowing with milk and honey.” No one does it like they use to do it! And somehow I am not hearing a refrain of “Give me that old-time religion” rising out of you.

One baptism...even in the New Testament itself, the unity of baptism is stretched. We know the basic form of baptism that begins with repentance and faith and leads to baptism: that’s the model of the response of those gathered to hear the apostles on Pentecost. Peter preached; people responded in repentance and faith, and baptism followed. What is not clear is the location—a river, a creek, a standing pool, but certainly water was used.

One baptism...later baptism would include the entire household of the one who repents and has faith. What is not clear is that the household shared the same experience and faith as the master of the household, but they were swept up in the baptism as well, whether they chose it or not. If the master of the household were baptized, then the whole household—children, household slaves, and so on—were baptized. This, incidentally, is the best Biblical warrant for the baptism of children.

One baptism...the baptism of a believer, the baptism of those related to that believer, and then what to make of this? To the church in Corinth, where some questioned the reality of the resurrection of the dead—whether those who died are truly raised—the Apostle Paul makes an offhand comment: “...what will those people do who receive baptism on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised

at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?” (1 Corinthians 15:29). Paul’s focus is not on baptism but on the resurrection, but what is this baptism for the dead? Nowhere else in Scripture is there any mention of “baptism on behalf of the dead.” By the way, one Biblical commentator totaled up over 200 different explanations of what Paul meant by “baptism on behalf of the dead.” It is a conundrum, to say the least.

One baptism...hard to hold on to “holy baptism” with such diversity. However, all is not chaos. Indeed, let me move from the weeds—from the unsettled questions—to what we can claim and say about “one baptism.” My intention is to be as “catholic” as possible—“catholic” with a little “c.” The word “catholic” simply means “all-embracing, universal, and broadly inclusive.” When we say in the Apostle’s Creed that we believe in the “holy catholic church,” we do not mean the “Roman Catholic Church.” What we mean is this: from God’s point of view there is only one church. We are ones who give the church brand names like Presbyterian, Baptist, Lutheran, even Roman Catholic. We are the ones who make “denominations.” We even have a denomination known as the “Christian Church”—that brand of church began as a protest against denominations. They gave up names like Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist in order simply to be called “Christian.” But now it is a denominational name!

We give ourselves these denominational names but there is only one, catholic church before God. So what of this “one baptism,” as our text from Ephesians asserts. One baptism...what can we assert and claim that is “catholic” or “all-inclusive?” Much better theologians and people of faith than I have struggled with this question, but let me offer the best resolution I know to what is the “one baptism” that brings us together. In other words, what brings together Baptists and the-like who insist on believer baptism AND Presbyterians and the-like who encourage infant baptism?

Here’s the best resolution that I know: there is a certain combination to our faith, a balance of ingredients that is required. The key is the items in the combination...not the sequence. Here’s an analogy: a good meal might include an appetizer, a meat entrée, vegetable and starch sides, and dessert. There is a normal or expected order for this fare, but if someone chose to eat their dessert first and the appetizer last and all the rest in between, you can’t say that they missed out on anything.

In similar fashion, there is a combination of ingredients that come together for us in the catholic church (“catholic” with a little “c”). Three ingredients are integral and necessary: (1) formation in faith, (2) water baptism, and (3) participation in community of faith.¹ Is there a normal order? Yes, our Baptist friends would tell us that formation in faith and participation in the community come before water baptism. Indeed, they might even say that participation in the community does not have to be prior to water baptism. The formation in faith—the claiming of Jesus as Lord and Savior in our lives—is the first step; then water baptism, and then participation in the community. We share with Baptists this conviction: the participation in the community. There is no such thing as an individual Christian—participation in the community of faith is essential. If we are not part of the body of Christ, we are like an amputated limb that has no real use.

¹ While my summary may oversimplify the complexities of “one baptism,” I have been influenced by an extended treatment of this theme by Dagmar Heller, “Toward One Baptism,” *Ecumenical Review*. Oct 2015, Vol. 67 Issue 3, pp 436-449.

In the same breadth that our Scripture affirms “one baptism,” it is premised by the affirmation of “one body”—there is no life outside the body. When someone tells me, “I am Christian but I am not part of organized religion—any group, any church, or any community,” my first response is to want to say: “Come visit us at First Presbyterian Church—we regularly practice disorganized religion!” However, a more graphic image comes to my mind: the scene outside a hospital tent following a battle during the Civil War. You may recall there was no medical way to fight infection—indeed dirt was thought by some to have curative power. So one of the primary means of treating a wound was to amputate the affected limb. Amputation was the best practice of medicine for the health of a wounded soldier. So there are historical photos of army hospital tents with amputated limbs stacked like cord wood outside the operating theater.

Is this gruesome? Yes? Does it push too far away from “one baptism?” No, for in the same expression from Scripture about “one baptism” is the expression “one body.” Being part of the community is part of the combination that marks true faith.

Again, here are the three ingredients: formation in faith, water baptism, and participation in the community. For our Baptist friends, formation in faith leads to water baptism and participation in the community.

How about Presbyterians (and others who include the practice of infant baptism)? Water baptism comes first and participation in the community and formation in the faith go hand and hand going forward. This is the sequence that many of us know—we simply know that we were baptized in our infancy. Faith formation and participation in the community of faith follow.

For example, I know that the Rev. Henry Dockery Brown baptized me in 1956 in the First Presbyterian Church of Rock Hill, South Carolina...but I have no memory of him or the event. But just as I am sure of the baptism (I have been give the records from the Session minutes), I am even more absolutely clear that faith formation and participation in the community moved forward together. I am so indebted to Sunday School teachers, camp counselors, and caring adults who nurtured me. And faith was a matter of the personal journey of embracing the challenges and opportunities of learning and of service. But water baptism came first.

The three ingredients are present...just in a different sequence. Moreover, here is what is catholic for us all: water baptism is a one-and-done event, but faith formation and participation in the community are ongoing. Water-baptism is like being 12 years old—you can only be 12 years old once. None of us can repeat that. However, faith formation and participation in the community are more like eating. You may choose a diet, but you cannot choose to live and choose NOT to eat. Faith formation and participation in the community are just as vital as eating.

Faith formation—worship, devotional practices, learning, acts of service—we never finish our formation. John Calvin once noted that no one graduates from the school of Christ on this side of the grave—we are always students. I will admit to having formation fatigue at times—one more thing to do, one more expression of generosity, one more challenge to my capacity to forgive, one more surprise at the outcome of things. And I certainly know of fatigue with community. In fact, you may know the label for this fatigue experience. There are lots of references in our culture to the “Nones”—no religious faith of any particular identification, simply “spiritual without being religious.” There are also the “Dones”—those “done with” the church, “done” with the organized religion. And some of those “dones” are our neighbors, our siblings, our children, our

grandchildren. And yet connection to the community—even when we get fed up with, bored with, or just exhausted by togetherness—we are only alive in faith as we stay connected.

One baptism...holy baptism that sets us apart—a vital ingredient but not the only ingredient of our faith story that includes continual faith formation and continual participation in the community.

One baptism...holy baptism that sets us apart. So let me conclude with baptism story coming out of the life and faith of Martin Luther, the great Reformer.

Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, is remembered for his courage and conviction as well as his fear and anxiety. In today's world we would wonder if Martin Luther did not need some medication or at least serious counseling. After all, he committed to becoming a priest during a thunderstorm that scared him out his wits. He once saw the devil in his room and threw an inkwell at him, ending up with nice ink stain on the wall, but he seemed to have missed his infernal visitor. Luther was incredibly anxious—so many intelligent, powerful, and even Christian people were saying he was wrong and that things were going bad. It would have been very easy to simply say—“O how awful!”—and give up.

Luther tells that, in darkest times, when he questioned if he was really doing the right thing—whether things would work out—he would speak these words to himself: “I am baptized.” “I am baptized.” Like most Presbyterians, Luther had no recollection of his baptism. He had nothing to do with it. His parents had taken him down to the parish church and the priest had baptized him. For Luther this “fact” of his baptism, which he had nothing do with, was a reminder that God had begun with him long before Luther began with God. God would finish the work begun in his baptism. Luther's self-coaching or self-encouragement was to say: “I am baptized.” God would complete the good work begun in that baptism.

Claim your baptism...claim your baptism in faith formation and community participation, and God will complete the good work in you.