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Sanctified Waters: Toward a Baptismal Ethic of Creation Care

TIMOTHY H. ROBINSON

“Water is Earth’s lifeblood,” declares Christian ethicist John Hart.¹ That is, water is the life-giving, life-sustaining substance for all living things on Earth. With this image Hart alludes to the vital importance of water for Christian spirituality as well as to water’s indispensable role in sustaining life on planet Earth. Increasingly however, Earth’s life-giving waters are under stress. Pollution, privatization, overconsumption, diversion, and desertification strain the watery circulatory system that sustains human life and all other life on the planet. Pathogens now clog the earth’s bloodstream and threaten the health of the entire planet. In using water sacramentally in baptism, Christians claim that God uses it as a means of divine encounter. Thus, the state of watersheds across the globe and human treatment of them has significant implications for Christian discipleship. In this essay, I consider the implications of Earth’s water crises for baptismal theology and the implications of baptism for Christian ecological ethics. In the first part I share two recent experiences that prompt me to reflect on the connection between baptism and water crises. In the second part I examine early Christian writings on the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River, noting how they suggest Jesus’ baptism bears cosmic significance. In the final section I suggest some implications of those early writings for a contemporary “baptismal eco-ethics.”

Baptistery and Lakeshore

Recently two experiences prompted me to consider the role of water in Christian discipleship. The first was on Easter Sunday when two young people were baptized in the church I attend. After making the confession of faith, “I believe that Jesus is the Christ and I accept Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior,” each young person entered the baptismal pool that occupies a central place at the front of the sanctuary. The pastor then prayed, thanking God for the gift of water that nourishes and sustains all living things, for the gift of creation that God brought forth from the watery chaos as described in the first chapter of Genesis, and for the gift of salvation that God has been working out over the centuries through the life of Israel and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The pastor gave thanks for the gift of baptismal waters in which we are buried with Jesus Christ into his death and raised again with him to share in the power of his resurrection, the first fruits of the new creation. Each candidate for baptism was immersed in the Triune name and welcomed by the congregation “into the circle of love in Christ’s church.”² The assembly was reminded that we are all born to life out of water, and that through baptism God’s Spirit uses water again to initiate Christian believers into a new existence, one that anticipates the fullness of God’s reign.

The second occurred a few weeks later when my children and I spent an afternoon at a nearby lake, wading and playing along the shore. The lake is one of several reservoirs in the Dallas–Fort Worth area that gather water from the various forks of the Trinity River and store it to be used by the region’s seven million human residents. While there, we noticed the waterline had receded significantly, exposing acres and acres of

1. John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2006), 79.

2. “Welcome After Baptism,” *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1995), 369.

dry and muddy ground. Grass was growing in many places where the lakebed is normally covered by many feet of water. Like most of Texas, North Texas has been experiencing drought for several years. Recently the Tarrant County Water District has been preparing to implement the restrictions on consumer water usage that go into effect when overall water storage drops to 75 percent of capacity. Statewide, reservoirs were 66 percent full at the time of this writing, an 11 percent drop from the spring of 2012.³ As we played on the shores of the shrunken lake that spring day, we also noticed a host of human waste exposed now to our sight: old tires, broken glass, aluminum cans, rusting barrels, plastic grocery bags, a stray sandal, the frame of someone's lost sunglasses, etc. Great blue herons and snowy egrets waded in the shallows seeking their afternoon meals amidst plastic bottles and paper bags that lay strewn about on the muddy ground or bobbed in the gentle waves. There was much beauty to absorb there, to be sure, but the visible debris that accompanied our view of the lake reminded me of the human impact on the world's water sources. The distance of the waterline from the shore was a warning of the precariousness of the water supply in a drought-stricken region and, indeed, in many arid places around the globe.

These two experiences—one near a baptismal pool, the other by the lakeshore—invite reflection on the relationship between Christian baptism and one of the world's most pressing ecological issues: water justice. My day by the lake was a reminder that abundant clean water is essential to life on planet Earth and that it is becoming increasingly scarce. Water crises—that is, situations in which the supply of fresh, unpolluted, potable water does not equal the needs of a region—are increasingly common around the world. Overconsumption, pollution, privatization, and climate change are affecting water supplies in many regions in Texas and across the globe. In fact, it has often been said that future wars will be fought over water rather than oil. Not only humans (who need access to safe, clean, affordable water to survive) feel the impact but water crises also impinge upon entire ecosystems and their other-than-human inhabitants. Evidence of a budding water crisis close to home invites me to consider how my personal water usage contributes to either the degradation or enhancement of this vital resource.

In addition, my baptismal identity invites me to view my relationship to water as a vital dimension of the ethical responsibility I bear as one united with Jesus Christ, the One through whom God is making all things new. Witnessing baptisms on Easter Sunday was a reminder that Christians have always used water ritually as a sign of God's gracious presence and activity. From the time that the gospel writers recorded Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River, *the bath*—as liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop terms it—has been a life-giving source of renewal and redemption.⁴ Water baptism has been understood by Christians as a material sign given by God by which our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer offers himself to us, inviting us to share in the new creation through his resurrection. Reflecting on baptism by the shores of a polluted and depleted lake calls attention to something that may seem quite obvious: the material substance used as a sign of God's grace in baptism is drawn from that same water upon which all living things depend for survival. Put another way, the water used to baptize believers into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in congregations across North Texas are drawn out of the dammed, polluted, and depleted Trinity River. What implications does this fact have for our understanding of baptism? How does it inform our sense of ethical responsibility for Earth's ecosystems as followers of Jesus Christ?

I believe baptism is an excellent place for members of the Stone-Campbell Movement to begin contemplating their ecological responsibility. Baptism has been one of the distinctive emphases of the various branches of the Stone-Campbell Movement from its beginnings; Stone-Campbell adherents have contributed much to the practice and the understanding of baptism over the last two centuries. Sadly, differences of conviction about baptism have also been sources of division within the Movement itself. I do not wish to focus here on the differences among the distinct groups who claim the heritage of Barton Stone and Alexander and Thomas Campbell; rather, I affirm the importance of baptism among the Churches of Christ, the Christian Churches, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Each branch of our movement has affirmed a number of baptismal meanings in common through the years—including baptism as a sign of God's grace, the response of

3. Bill Hanna, "Water Restrictions Likely on the Way for North Texas," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, May 14, 2013, 1A.

4. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 89.

faithful disciples of Jesus Christ, participation in the saving death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, a sign of God's forgiveness, and incorporation into the life of the Christ's church. About these and other dimensions of baptism we can bear common witness. While affirming the vital importance of baptism to Stone-Campbell adherents, my focus here will be on how the practice of baptism might promote a Christian ethic of creation care—or as I have termed it, a *baptismal eco-ethic*.⁵ I now turn to early Christian writings on baptism to inform this developing ethical consciousness.

The Cosmic Significance of Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan River

Exegetical, theological, liturgical, and catechetical texts on baptism from the first Christian centuries are thematically rich and diverse. Early Christian writings on baptism often began with reflections on the meaning of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptizer in the Jordan River (Matt 3.13–17, Mark 1.9–11, Luke 3.21–22, John 1.29–34). Looking to Scripture and these early writings is instructive as I reflect on the contemporary meaning of baptism and its implications for ecological ethics. My focus here will be on the baptism of Jesus and how early Christian writers thought about the cosmic significance of that event.

Before looking at Jesus's baptism, however, I must also note briefly that the entire Bible is saturated with water. The very first verses of Genesis relate a story of God creating all things out of water chaos. As “a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Gen 1.3) God calls forth a diverse and abundant creation and pronounces it good. As Linda Gibler observes, the biblical text indicates that “God does not work alone, but creates the world through the medium of water.”⁶ In Genesis 7–9 God uses water to cleanse the earth of the pollution visited upon it by human wickedness. However, God again sends a wind to blow across the earth (Gen 8.1) causing the floodwaters to recede. God again commissions the humans and other living creatures to “be fruitful and multiply on the earth” (Gen 8.17). Here God makes a covenant with Noah “and with every living creature” that the waters shall never again become a destroying flood (Gen 9.8–17). In Exodus water plays a significant role in another covenant God makes with Israel. As the Israelites flee Egyptian bondage, the Red Sea parts for them to escape to safety then closes again to destroy their pursuing enemies, thus securing their future as God's covenant people (Exod 14). Their years of wilderness wandering end as they arrive at the banks of the Jordan River: just as the Red Sea parted before them so does the Jordan, allowing the Israelites to enter the land promised to them as God's covenant people (Josh 3.14–17). As they enter a land of abundance—a land “flowing with milk and honey”—across the temporarily dry riverbed, a new life of promise and hope begins. Gibler notes that in the crossing of the Jordan, “water once more reflects God's judgment and becomes the threshold of new life.”⁷

Water plays a significant role throughout the Hebrew Bible in various ways, but the crossing of the Jordan provides a transition to the focus of this section: the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. Killian McDonnell has identified the cosmic significance of Jesus's baptism as a significant theme in early Christian writings. According to McDonnell, the baptism of Jesus—and thus, by implication, the baptism of believers—was not regarded by early Christians as “an isolated act of private piety.... [T]he meaning is also cosmic.”⁸ The

5. I write from my perspective as an ordained member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and as a scholar-teacher in one of the seminaries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). My early formation took place within the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ and I received my early theological education from institutions supported by Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. I was fortunate to have been influenced by professors who longed to maintain ties across the three major branches of the Stone-Campbell family and who, as one of my teachers repeatedly insisted, refused to view our differences as sources of division. I am grateful for the irenic spirit of my teachers and I continue to benefit from fellowship with sisters and brothers from every part of the Stone-Campbell movement and from the perspectives of scholars from its various branches. Still, I am firmly located within the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) and my perspective is shaped by that location.

6. Linda Gibler, *From the Beginning to Baptism: Scientific and Sacred Stories of Water, Oil, and Fire* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 13.

7. Gibler, *From the Beginning to Baptism*, 16. Gibler reflects more extensively on each of these narratives on pages 12–17.

8. Killian McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan: The Trinitarian and Cosmic Order of Salvation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 50.

messianic dimension of Jesus's baptism and the way that it marked the beginning of his public ministry were important for patristic writers, but these themes did not exhaust its meaning. First, McDonnell notes how early Christian writers used imagery from nature rhetorically to reason toward the meaning of Jesus's baptism. For example, drawing on Stoic imagery and vocabulary, Melito of Sardis (d. 190) likened Jesus's baptism to how all of creation is constantly being bathed:

"If you wish to observe the heavenly bodies being baptized, make haste now to the Ocean, and there I will show you a strange sight...the heavenly bodies being baptized." At the end of the day they "make haste now to the ocean," there to go down into the waters, into the "outspread sea, and boundless main, an infinite deep, and immeasurable Ocean, and pure water." The sun sinks into the sea and when it has been "bathed in symbolic baptism," it comes up exultantly from the waters, rising as a new sun, "purified from the bath." What the sun does, so do the stars and moon: "they bathe in the sun's swimming pool, like good disciples."⁹

According to Melito, it is reasonable to think that if the sun, moon and stars are baptized in water then Christ, "the king of heaven and creation's captain...a Sun out of heaven," should also bathe in the Jordan. McDonnell calls this the "cosmic justification for Jesus's baptism."¹⁰ The rhetorical power of Melito's analogy, however, suggests that all the elements of creation participate in baptism as a sign of God's blessing.

Another way that early Christian writers thought about the cosmic dimension of Jesus's baptism was that it sanctified the earth's waters. According to Jacob of Serugh (d. 521), the waters of the Jordan did not require sanctification or blessing prior to Jesus's baptism as baptismal waters do in later liturgical texts. In the first place, this line of reasoning protected Jesus's sinlessness: "The Spirit did not come down to sanctify the water for Christ to be baptized in, for sanctification flows from the holy Son. [Only] after Christ has washed and gone up from the water did the Spirit descend in order to indicate [him], and not to sanctify."¹¹ Further, however, this point emphasizes that Jesus's entry into the river served to hallow the water itself. Alluding to Isaiah's inaugural vision (Isa 6.6), Jacob sees Jesus as a live coal going down into the Jordan "thus inflaming and sanctifying the waters."¹² Jacob likens it to the effects of fire: "(Christ) the Coal of fire (Isa 6.6) went down to wash in the (Jordan's) streams and the flames of its sanctifying power poured forth."¹³ The sanctifying effect of Jesus's baptism does not stop at the banks of the Jordan, however: it extends to all waters. All of the earth's water systems, and thus *all* baptismal waters, are consecrated by Jesus's baptism. "The entire nature of the waters perceive that you have visited them—seas, deeps, rivers, springs and pools all thronged together to receive the blessing from your footsteps," muses Jacob.¹⁴ In his *Prose Homilies* Jacob exults, "our Lord went down to the Jordan, and the whole nature of water stirred with joy."¹⁵ Such a statement suggests that all water is consecrated by the action of Jesus and that the earth's waters are infused with the capability of mediating divine presence.

The first two themes lead to a third: Jesus's baptism is a bridge between the original creation and new creation. Patristic writers often note the resonances between Jesus's baptism and the creation accounts in Genesis. The late fifth-century text *The Teaching of St. Gregory* has a long section on the baptism of Jesus. The event is understood in connection with the Genesis creation account in which the Spirit "moves over the waters, and thence set out the order of the creatures."¹⁶ With Adam's sin, the Spirit left not only Adam, but the entire

9. *Ibid.*, 50–51.

10. *Ibid.*, 51.

11. *Ibid.*, 67–68.

12. *Ibid.* This theme is echoed by Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 389) who said that Jesus "sanctifies the Jordan" at his baptism.

13. Sebastian Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh," *Symposium Syriacum* 1976 (Rome: Pontifical Institute of Oriental Studies, 1978), 326–27.

14. Brock, "Baptismal Themes in the Writings of Jacob of Serugh," 327.

15. *Ibid.*

16. McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 60–61.

creation. Sin “had weakened and enfeebled and deprived [the waters] of the grace of the Spirit.”¹⁷ However, just as the Spirit brings order from chaos in the first creation, Christ enters the Jordan River “and by treading the waters with his own footstep, [h]e sanctified them and made them purifying.”¹⁸ Thus begins the renewal of all creation. In the beginning, with water, God “fattened all plants and reptiles and wild animals and beasts and birds, and by the freshness of the waters they sprung from the earth.” Likewise, in Jesus’s baptism God “made verdant the womb of generation of the waters, purifying the waters and renewing... earthy matter.”¹⁹ The baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of a new creation. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386) in his *Catechetical Lectures* affirms, “‘The Spirit of God was stirring above the waters.’ With water the world began; the Jordan saw the beginning of the gospels.”²⁰ McDonnell summarizes Cyril’s teaching thus: “Genesis and gospel both begin with water... Spirit and water are at the beginning of the creation and at the beginning of the gospel. No new creation, no new age is possible without water.”²¹ At the Jordan, “[h]e renewed and rejuvenated creation once and for all. He opened the womb of baptism,” according to the *Teaching of St. Gregory*.²² The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan anticipates the renewal and restoration of a fallen creation and invites human beings, as part of their own renewal and restoration, to participate in the rebirth of the whole cosmos.

Baptismal Eco-Ethics

This very small sample of early Christian reflections on Jesus’s baptism in the Jordan is richly suggestive for our understanding of baptism in a time when Earth’s waters are under tremendous stress. The cosmic significance of Jesus’s baptism can inform the personal and ecclesial interpretations of baptism that have predominated in baptismal theology for much of Christian history. Of course, early Christian writers viewed baptism through a personal lens as well. The womb imagery used in the *Teaching of St. Gregory* was a common way for early Christian writers to talk about what happens to the believer who undergoes baptism. Justin Martyr (d. 165), for example, notes in his description of an early baptismal rite that the washing is followed by a reading of John 3.3.²³ Womb and tomb were often juxtaposed to describe the death and rebirth that occur when persons undergo baptism. Cyril of Jerusalem, for example, likens the three washings to the three days Jesus spent in the tomb after his crucifixion. He writes, “At one and the same time you were dying and being born, and that saving water became at once your grave and your mother.”²⁴ Linda Gibler summarizes these early teachings thus: “In the womb and tomb water of baptism a person dies to sin, is cleansed and recreated, and then is born in the new creation of the reign of God.”²⁵ Thus, the cosmic and personal dimensions of dying and rising with Christ in baptism are not opposed to one another; rather, they are complementary. This complementarity provides a generative place to begin developing a baptismal ecological ethic.

One thing that early Christian reflections on baptism suggest is an understanding of water—the material substance of water itself—as charged with sacred presence and purpose. Tertullian (d. 225), in his *Homily on Baptism*, suggests that God favors water above other elements. Grounding his reflections on baptism in the creation accounts of Genesis, he enjoins his audience to revere the ancient waters themselves.²⁶ Through water, God creates, judges, renews, gives signs of promise, and participates in the life of creation. We should not think of the waters we draw from the earth to enact our baptismal rites as distinct from or ancillary to God’s purposes. The waters themselves are God’s own creation, God’s instrument for accomplishing divine purposes. So urgent is Tertullian to affirm the goodness and importance of water to God, he worries that his

17. Ibid., 61.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., 62.

20. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 3.5, quoted in McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 54.

21. McDonnell, *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan*, 54–55.

22. Ibid.

23. “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” Gibler, *From the Beginning to Baptism*, 23.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Tertullian, *Homily on Baptism*, ed. and trans. Ernest Evans (London: SPCK, 1964), 7.

audience may think he is composing an ode to water itself rather than a doctrine of baptism! However, he asserts, God “has brought into service in his very own sacraments that same material which he has had at his disposal in all his acts and works.” By means of the material elements of God’s creation, we are guided in both *earthly* and *heavenly* things.²⁷ The work of twentieth-century British Disciple William Robinson (d. 1963) affirms Tertullian’s point. Robinson reasoned that Christian sacraments employ material things—water, bread, wine—that represent “the very necessities of life, of *this* life.” Thus, he asserted, the sacraments show us that Christian faith “has to do with *this* life as well as the life to come.” He went on to say, “In Christianity, the *material* is not the opposite of the *spiritual*;” rather, as a “sacramental religion,” Christian faith “transfigures and transforms the life of this world, making all things new, investing everything and every action with a new significance.”²⁸ The sacramental significance of water helps us see the vital interconnection among living things that depend upon its material reality for survival and flourishing. It suggests the care of the Creator for the creation and the potential for divine encounter in *this* life, in *this* world.

This leads to a second suggestion we may take from early Christian reflections on baptism. Baptism charges believers with an ethical imperative to care for Earth’s waters and all those who depend upon them. Those baptized in water bear responsibility for the health and equitable distribution of Earth’s water and other resources. Disciples of Christ have long understood baptism as “the first ethical action of human life” which in turn informs all other ethical actions that follows.²⁹ As Steven Sprinkle notes, we respond to the call of the apostle, “Repent and be baptized” (Acts 2.38). “In this sense,” Sprinkle writes, “baptism is at the root of all Christian ethical action, the indelible sign that our lives and fortunes belong to God and not to us.”³⁰ Early Christian reflections on Jesus’s baptism suggest that in Christian baptism the whole earth, through its lifeblood, is united with Jesus’s suffering and death. In baptism, not only the candidate but also all living things are crucified and buried with Christ. If the baptism of Jesus opened the womb of rebirth and restoration for all things, then Christian believer’s baptism opens the womb of rebirth for us as well. As we participate in this personal rebirth we are invited to participate in the cosmic rebirth. If, as Gibler says, “in the womb and tomb waters of baptism a person dies to sin, is cleansed and recreated, and then is born into the new creation of the reign of God,” then is not the baptized person—and the community of the baptized—obligated to “die to the sin” of ecological degradation, overconsumption, and the unjust appropriation of resources?³¹ In baptism we are washed of our ecological sins and born into a new creation, the reign of God in which all the baptized participate in the healing of the planet. The one who dies, is buried, and is raised with the Christ is charged with and equipped for participating in the healing and reconciling work that contributes to the full flourishing of the whole created order. The practice of baptism anticipates the full reign of God when God’s creation will be brought into its ultimate flourishing, inviting believers to envision that reign and live into as much as possible in the present.

Conclusion

Baptism in water presents the church with an opportunity to contemplate the pollution and scarcity of the earth’s water systems and the ways in which all who depend on them are threatened when water sources are polluted, dried up, or privatized and appropriated for the profit of large corporations.³² As the ecumenical

27. Tertullian, *Homily on Baptism*, 9.

28. William Robinson, *Completing the Reformation: The Doctrine of the Priesthood of All Believers* (Lexington, KY: The College of the Bible, 1955), 50–51.

29. Steven V. Sprinkle, “The Disciples Vision of Christian Baptism,” in *Baptism and Belonging*, ed. Keith Watkins (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1991), 19.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Gibler, *From the Beginning to Baptism*, 23.

32. For reflections on water justice in the two-thirds world as it relates to Christian spirituality, see Laura Stivers, “Water as Earth’s Bloodstream: Latina Ecofeminist Spirituality and Water Justice,” in *Spirit and Nature: The Study of Christian Spirituality in a Time of Ecological Urgency*, ed. Timothy Hessel-Robinson and Ray Maria McNamara (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011): 201–219.

document *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry* states, baptism compels Christian believers “to strive for the realization of the will of God in all realms of life (Rom 6.9ff, Gal 3.27–28, 1 Pet 2.21–4.6).”³³ I have argued here that the ethical imperative of baptism includes responsible action toward other-than-human creatures and ecosystems so that the will of God for the flourishing of the whole creation might be realized. Baptism in water, water drawn from the earth’s lifeblood, connects us intimately to the material elements upon which humans and all living beings depend for survival. The sacramental connection between the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the material elements that function for us as signs of God’s saving and sanctifying work in Jesus set forth a moral vision for the Christian life that includes attentive care for the earth and just distribution of its resources.

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33. *Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper No. 111* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982), 4.