



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Baptism and Profound Intellectual Disability
(*Disability*, pp. 60-67)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Baptism and Profound Intellectual Disability

Is there room in the baptismal waters and at the Lord's Supper table for persons with profound intellectual disability? For Christians who practice believers' baptism, the question goes to the heart of what it means to be the Church and to welcome the giftedness of each person in our midst.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Ephesians 2:17-22

Meditation†

Over the years I have worked with many people whose life experience includes profound cognitive disability. I am always struck by the overwhelming sense that despite the apparent inability of some people to understand and respond in the ways that are expected by the majority, there is much more to their lives than can be seen through eyes which register only pathology and suffering. Even those with the most profound forms of disability are able to worship.

John Swinton

Reflection

"Baptism is supposed to follow faith as a person's conscious and voluntary act of obedience to Christ's command" according to Baptists and others who practice believer's baptism. "This act of obedience serves as the initiatory rite into the Church," Jason Whitt observes, and "the Lord's Supper is reserved for baptized believers – those persons who by baptism have become members of the Church." So, he wonders, if those with profound intellectual disabilities cannot "consciously and freely turn to Christ and follow him in baptism, must they remain outside of the Church and not share the table with those who are followers of Christ?"

There is no question that God's saving grace extends to the profoundly disabled: "these children and adults are held firmly within God's love," Whitt explains. Yet while they are welcomed by their church families, they remain "in a child-like position in the Church... [and] never fully belong to the community of believers." Fearing that this will "betray the gospel that demands a place for the 'least of these' because Christ has broken down the barriers that separate us – including the one between able-bodied and disabled," Whitt explores how we might "remain true to Baptist convictions on believer's baptism and sharing of the table while making room for those who can never act on their own volition or understanding to confess faith in Christ."

- ▶ *Baptism is more than a symbol.* Since the ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, are reserved for only those who believe, they are more than symbols, they are *acts of belonging*. "Something takes place: a person is brought into the community of the Church and a new identity as one baptized begins to be formed. Likewise, [in] taking the meal... a shared identity is forged among those around the table." Whitt says. Ordinances "are acts of threefold agency: God, the Church, and the candidate. Because they are given by



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Christ to the Church, there must be a body of believers gathered together who can offer them. When people turn to Christ in faith and become new creations, it is the Church that forms them into the new identity discovered in the gospel narrative.”

- ▶ *The Church is more than a voluntary association*, because it is this sort of identity-forming community. “Believers learn what it means to be disciples as they are formed within the community that lives the gospel story.” Early Baptists thought the Church was ‘voluntary’ in another sense: “each believer finds faith apart from coercion from earthly powers.”
- ▶ *Baptizing the intellectually disabled is not like infant baptism*. Admittedly, they cannot comprehend the “belongingness” of the ordinances, but can their “response to the gospel” be expressed in other ways? As Michael Taylor reminds us, “It is true that we look for a response to the gospel in those who come to join the Church, but we are made members of Christ far more by what is given than is expected.”

These reflections lead Whitt to suggest “those in the tradition of believer’s baptism should baptize persons with profound intellectual disabilities – not all such persons indiscriminately, but those children and adults who are already present in our congregations, the sons and daughters of faithful parents who have included them in the life of the Church.” He says “believer’s baptism remains the norm for most. The intention is not to turn from this conviction, but rather to recognize that there are cases where baptizing one who cannot confess faith is a proper affirmation of that person’s place in the body of Christ.”

Study Questions

1. Why do Christians who practice believer’s baptism emphasize the symbolic function of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper? How, according to Jason Whitt, does their practice indicate these are more than symbolic?
2. Compare and contrast infant baptism with Whitt’s proposal for baptizing those with profound intellectual disabilities.
3. Why, according to Whitt, is it important to move toward a practice of baptizing those in the Church with profound intellectual disabilities? Do you agree?

Departing Hymn: “Jesus, Our Lord and King” (verses 1 and 4)

Jesus, our Lord and King,
to you our praises rise;
to you our bodies we present,
a living sacrifice.

Baptized into your death,
with you again we rise,
to newness of a life of faith,
to new and endless joys.

Anonymous

Suggested Tunes: ST. MICHAEL or ST. THOMAS

† John Swinton, “Introduction: Re-imagining Genetics and Disability,” in John Swinton and Brian Brock, eds., *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics: Why Science Needs the Church* (2007), 13.

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Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2 and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss how Baptists and others who practice believer's baptism obey the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.
2. To consider a proposal for Christians in that tradition to baptize certain youth and adults in the Church who have profound intellectual disabilities.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-14 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Disability (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Jesus, Our Lord and King" locate one of the familiar tunes ST. MICHAEL or ST. THOMAS in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City there is a beautiful oil painting, *The Adoration of the Christ Child*, attributed to an anonymous fifteenth-century artist in The Netherlands. (See it online at www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110001225.) The composition is quite unusual. We are present with the holy family in the stable, but through a window we can see that it is the very night when the shepherds heard the angels singing. The Christ child is naked in the Manger. With Joseph and Mary, seven angels kneel around the Christ child, while seven cherubs bounce about the ceiling, distracted with joy. Two townspeople peer down at the newborn from the background.

But this is the most unusual feature of the painting: the angel and the townspeople who are nearest to Mary have unmistakable features of Down syndrome and mental retardation. Perhaps it is the first representation of this intellectual disability in art. These two are not singled out in any way; they are simply among the worshippers, human and angelic, of the Christ child.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by thanking God for family members or friends in your congregation who have profound intellectual disabilities.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Ephesians 2:17-22 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study explores how the Church is called to practice baptism and the Lord's Supper in relation to those in the Church whose understanding of and response to God's love are shaped by their profound intellectual disabilities. Jason Whitt explains why this is a thorny issue for Baptists and others who practice believer's baptism. However, there is a parallel (and, perhaps, equally difficult) question for Christian traditions that practice infant baptism: How should these churches practice the rite of confirmation (which confers the gift of the Holy Spirit and full church membership) in relation to those with profound intellectual disabilities?

Study Questions

1. The Baptists and other Christians who practice believer's baptism emphasize that through the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper the believer is expressing outwardly a spiritual reality – namely, the believer's salvation through God's grace that has been faithfully welcomed into one's life. Receiving baptism and sharing in the Lord's Supper are the believer's conscious and free acts of obedience that flow from a grace-imbued, faithful life.
2. The practice of the ordinances in this tradition is more complex, Jason Whitt suggests. While they have "great symbolic significance," it is also the case that "God's grace is conveyed through them." In other words, the ordinances involve a three-way agency or communication of the believer, the Church, and God. "To hold an initiation rite reserved for only those who believe suggests that baptism is more than mere symbol. Something takes place: a person is brought into the community of the Church and a new identity as one baptized begins to be formed. Likewise, taking the meal is not only a symbolic reminder of Christ's sacrifice, but in eating and drinking together, a shared identity is forged among those around the table," Whitt writes. He calls the ordinances "acts of belonging" because through these acts the "individual members of the group are formed by the community even as they contribute to the further shaping of the community."
3. Whitt offers "with no small amount of fear and trembling" this proposal for further discussion: that "those in the tradition of believer's baptism should baptize persons with profound intellectual disabilities – not all such persons indiscriminately, but those children and adults who are already present in our congregations, the sons and daughters of faithful parents who have included them in the life of the Church. We offer this baptism into the community with the full conviction that believer's baptism remains the norm for most. The intention is not to turn from this conviction, but rather to recognize that there are cases where baptizing one who cannot confess faith is a proper affirmation of that person's place in the body of Christ." He believes that this practice differs in significant ways from infant baptism. Appoint two small groups to brainstorm the similarities and the differences.
4. An important similarity is that the candidates cannot express to themselves in thoughts or to others in words their response to God's love; this articulation is left to others who love them. Beyond that, the differences are many. The candidates with profound intellectual disabilities will be as old as others who receive believer's baptism; they may express their response to God's love in other behavioral ways; they will be contributing to the congregation's worship and ministry; they may have some (limited) theological understanding of their baptismal experience; they will not mature into the greater and sufficient understanding required for them to make a conscious and free choice to receive baptism; and they were not put forward for baptism because they were born in a particular region, to a particular family, and so on. Do these differences make a difference? Do they suggest the practice would not undermine a commitment to believer's baptism for all other members?
5. Whitt admits that a congregation need not baptize or share the Lord's Supper in order to express love to those with profound intellectual disabilities, or to support the faith of their families or caregivers. He suggests a different sort of reason for the practice he proposes. It expresses "the subversive nature of the Church" wherein "barriers are broken" so that members "discover in the body of Christ that they are dependent upon those they disregarded." Put another way, the practice enables us "to see the profoundly disabled as fellow brothers and sisters, members of God's kingdom, who have been given gifts we need and from whom we might learn."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.