

Baptism and Profound Intellectual Disability

BY JASON D. WHITT

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.

Is there room in the baptismal waters and at the Lord's Supper table for persons with profound intellectual disability? For some within the Christian tradition, there is a quick answer to the question about baptism: infants are baptized on the confession of faith of their parents. The dilemma, from their perspective, is whether persons with profound intellectual disability can mature in discipleship and be confirmed later in their faith. But how should Baptists and others who practice believer's baptism address the question? According to their practice, baptism is supposed to follow faith as a person's conscious and voluntary act of obedience to Christ's command. Baptism is symbolic of what has already happened in the person's life; it is a response (by the person and in a faith community) to what is already the case. This act of obedience serves as the initiatory rite into the Church. Consistent with this, the Lord's Supper is reserved for baptized believers—those persons who by baptism have become members of the Church.

So what is the place of those with profound intellectual disabilities in churches that practice believer's baptism? If they are unable to 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?

Let me focus the issue. The concern is not with the eternal salvation of

the profoundly disabled. There is a confidence that these children and adults are held firmly within God's love. They are loved by their church families and will be welcomed within the community even though they are not baptized. The default circumstance is that they will remain perpetually in a child-like position in the Church because of intellectual limitations. They will be nurtured and loved, but never fully belong to the community of believers.

Yet this situation is not entirely satisfying. It seems to 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. So, is there a way to 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? Two fundamental questions must be considered: how do we understand baptism and the Lord's Supper, and what is the nature of the Church? By taking these in turn, we may gain clarity for answering the question about the place of the profoundly disabled in our congregations. I write as a Baptist with the hope of sparking reflection among those who share similar convictions concerning baptism and the Lord's Supper.

THE "ORDINANCES"

Baptists often emphasize the symbolic function of baptism and the Lord's Supper, which are called the "ordinances" of the Church. Through these practices of the faith community, a believer signals, or outwardly expresses, a spiritual reality. The noted Baptist theologian Augustus Hopkins Strong (1836-1921) explains, "By the ordinances, we mean those outward rites which Christ has appointed to be administered in his church as visible signs of the saving truth of the gospel."¹ Regarding baptism, he writes, "Baptism symbolizes the previous entrance of the believer into the community of Christ's death and resurrection."² His student, W. T. Conner (1877-1952), adds, "While baptism does not save, nor is a condition of salvation, it does symbolize a salvation that comes to us by faith in Christ."³ Baptism, in their view, is an act that symbolically portrays a spiritual reality that is already accomplished—namely, salvation. Likewise, in taking the Lord's Supper believers remember Christ's sacrifice and testify to their constant appropriation of Christ's saving grace.

Contrast this to a more sacramental view of the ordinances. While agreeing that these actions have great symbolic significance, the sacramental view would add that God's grace is conveyed through them. Whereas Strong and Conner highlight the believer's role of obedience in openly confessing the divine salvation they have experienced, the sacramental view (as we will see below) offers a more complex account of who is doing what in the ordinances.

When we examine Baptists' practice of the ordinances, they are not merely symbolic; something more is taking place, something that changes those who receive the water and the meal. The first Baptists in the early seventeenth century (and others who would later practice believer's baptism) were con-

vinced that the basis of a regenerate Church must be baptism into membership and the partaking of bread and cup only by those who freely confessed to their faith in Christ. They rejected infant baptism because infants cannot choose to follow Christ and so voluntarily join the community of disciples. Congregations that practice believer's baptism today remain adamant that it is the act of immersion in obedience to Christ's command that *makes* a person a member of the Church. Only members share the meal, and they do not eat alone: believers are now in community with God and with one another.

So, what is happening in the water and the meal? 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.

To articulate this feature of the ordinances, Stanley Grenz draws upon the work of social theorists who note how members of particular communities

tend to have a similar outlook toward life, view the world in a similar manner, and construct the symbolic world they inhabit using similar linguistic and symbolic building materials, even if they are not of one mind as to the meaning of their shared world-constructing symbols.⁴

This shared identity develops through the common narrative that is told and lived through the language and practices that are peculiar to the group.⁵ Thus, individual members of the group are formed by the community even as they contribute to the further shaping of the community.

Baptism and the Lord's Supper are such "acts of belonging."⁶ Christ gave these practices to the Church and his Spirit works through them for the initiation and edification of all believers. Thus, they are more than mere symbols: they help to form the identity of the individuals who have accepted the saving grace of Christ. The bodily practices with the water, bread, and cup are constitutive parts of the story into which believers live. Baptism is a person's initiation into the Church where the gospel narrative—the way of living according to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ—is the identity-forming account of the community. The person now belongs to this group, yet initiation is neither the end nor the fullness of their identity. Thus, the Lord's Supper is a repeated reaffirmation of each member's belonging to the group, and so continues the shaping of their identity in the body of Christ.

Since the ordinances are acts of belonging that are constitutive of identity, they cannot be personal acts of symbolic remembrance. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are acts of threefold agency: God, the Church, and the candidate.⁷ Because they are given by Christ to the Church, there must be a body of believers gathered together who can offer them.⁸ 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. Grenz explains, “For this reason, baptism points beyond initiation into the Christian life to the goal of God’s saving activity, namely, the eschatological transformation of all believers within the context of the establishment of the new creation.”⁹ It is within the community that is being shaped by God’s future that a person takes on the identity of the new creation.

THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS

If the Church is an identity-forming community, it must be more than simply a voluntary association of believers (if “voluntary association” means that believers may or may not be part of this community depending on their preferences). Where the Church properly may be called “voluntary” is in each believer finding faith apart from coercion from earthly powers. This was the message of the early Baptists who rejected infant baptism as a matter of course for everyone who happened to be born in a particular political region. They understood the Church as a community of the regenerate – those who in faith had accepted God’s grace and were now living as disciples of Christ.

Believers learn what it means to be disciples as they are formed within the community that lives the gospel story. The Apostle Paul offers a compelling picture of this process when he describes the Church as “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). In the context of discussing spiritual gifts, Paul notes that each member is necessary to the body because each has gifts that are given for the benefit of all.

Indeed, those who seem weakest or of least value may be the most indispensable (12:22-23). In this Paul hints at the subversive nature of the Church. Accepted barriers are broken: Greek and Jew, slave and free, male and female have all been given gifts that the Church needs. This means that people who outside of the Church would have little interaction with one another – much less

acknowledge a need for one another – discover in the body of Christ that they are dependent upon those they disregarded.

Life together in Christ reveals that at the heart of what it means to be human is a dependence on one another, because each has been gifted by God for the good of everyone else. It is easy to imagine what believers might learn from the great saints: the spiritually powerful have much to educate the weak.

If baptism and the Lord’s Supper are given by Christ to the Church for the initiation and edification of believers, they are more than just symbols. They help to form the identity of those who have accepted the saving grace of Christ.

More challenging is imagining how the seemingly weak are gifted with offerings necessary for the apparently strong. So, Paul's account suggests the incomprehensible: the master finds himself in need of the gift of a slave. God's economy of gift giving overturns the world's economy of merit. The Church is the community in which this eschatological vision is lived in the world.

THE PLACE OF THE DISABLED IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

On this way of understanding the Church, baptism, and the Lord's Supper, is there any place for the profoundly mentally disabled in the water or at the table? One might think that if these practices require a conscious and reasoned assent to the call of Christ, then the answer must be "no." To the extent they are unable to understand a decision to follow Christ and the implications of that decision for their lives, the profoundly mentally disabled are not able to comprehend the "belongingness" of these acts, and thus to enter voluntarily into the community. To give them the ordinances would be akin to baptizing infants.

Yet is this last metaphor really appropriate? Infant baptism is rejected on the assumption that the child will come to an age where the choice for faith can be made. But what if, because of intellectual disability, the person will never reach a cognitive level where that choice is possible? In reflecting on this issue, Michael Taylor, a British Baptist educator and parent of a mentally disabled child, offers an important reminder: "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."¹⁰ That is, Christians who practice believer's baptism already recognize that salvation is something accomplished in us by Christ. The human part is not primary, but it is not insignificant. Perhaps how we account "a response to the gospel" should be reinterpreted in instances where intellectual assent is not possible.

If, as argued above, baptism accomplishes something — namely, the conferring of membership and belonging to the community of faith — withholding baptism from those whom we believe Christ has accepted but who cannot consciously respond entails the Church excluding the most vulnerable in our world. Such exclusion is not, of course, intentional. We intend to love and care for these. Yet, by denying baptism on the grounds that they have not accepted Christ, the clear message is sent: "Because you are limited, you can never be fully a member of this community."

I can imagine some fellow Baptists will raise an objection at this point. "If the Church is a voluntary gathering of those committed to discipleship, by definition the profoundly intellectually disabled cannot belong," they would say. "This does not mean God or the Church does not love them. If we are convinced that the profoundly mentally disabled have their place in God's kingdom and rest comfortably in the grace of Christ, what concern is there if they do not receive the water and the meal?"

The idea that continues to haunt me, however, is that the concern is not

just for them, but for all of us in the Church. What is lost to the community of faith in our refusal to baptize and share the table?

Reflecting again on the nature of the Church as the body of Christ in which each member is uniquely gifted for the good of the whole, we may need to consider what gifts the profoundly mentally disabled have been given for the benefit of the whole body. Often, the relationship to those with disabilities is seen as going only one way: the able-bodied Christians serving and caring for those who cannot do for themselves. A sense of Christian service and virtue is evident in the self-sacrifice of those who would care for such persons. However, the disabled person is reduced to a piece of spiritual exercise equipment on which able-bodied Christians can develop spiritual virtues by serving the “least of these.”

The gospel invites us to the greatest stretch of our imagination 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.¹¹ Our learning comes not by what we do for them, but from what they teach. What if their presence in the community of believers is essential to our coming to understand more of who God is, who we are, and who we are to be? They challenge us in our self-sufficiency, reminding that to be human is to be dependent. Perhaps they also teach about patient perseverance, or living in a moment without concern for tomorrow. For some people with profound cognitive disabilities, their gift to us may be simply presence – being and not doing. Other gifts may be gentleness, peacefulness, joy, wonder, or simply silence.¹²

All of this leads to a suggestion, which I offer here with no small amount of fear and trembling: 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.¹³

As we reflect on the nature of the Church as the body of Christ in which each member is uniquely gifted for the good of the whole, we need to consider what gifts the profoundly mentally disabled have been given for the benefit of the whole body.

In this baptism, we confirm their belonging to the body of Christ because we acknowledge that Christ has accepted them. And we baptize because we understand that the community of believers needs the gifts that God has given these members. They are not halfway members or junior members of the body – they are brothers and sisters with those who suppose themselves to be able-bodied. And finally, we share the Lord’s Table, coming together to eat and drink, and in so doing remember what Christ has done in us and what he makes of us as a new people – people who see in our most vulnerable a beauty and worth that the world cannot account.

As a final caveat, I add that this answer is really only a beginning point, the spark to a much larger and more challenging conversation. The spectrum of human intellectual capacity is broad, and so what is suggested here leaves untouched the great middle ground between the profoundly intellectually disabled and what we believe to be normal intelligence. How should we share the ordinances with the high functioning Down syndrome child who has only a very basic grasp of sin but loves Jesus, or the mentally disabled adult who functions at the level of a preschooler? As noted above, there must be significant discernment about what is understood by response to Christ’s call. My hope is that more congregations will begin having these important conversations not simply at pragmatic levels, but with serious theological reflection on what it means to be the Church, to baptize, to share the Lord’s Supper, and to account the worth and giftedness of each person in their midst.

NOTES

1 Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology*, revised (Philadelphia, PA: The Griffith & Rowland Press, 1907 [1866]), 930.

2 *Ibid.*, 940.

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

4 Stanley Grenz, “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper as Community Acts: Toward a Sacramental Understanding of the Ordinances,” in Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, eds., *Baptist Sacramentalism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 85.

5 James K. A. Smith offers important reflections on bodily practices and the formation of Christian identity, particularly through the liturgy, in *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, World-view, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009).

6 Grenz, “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper,” 92.

7 James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, Volume 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 389.

8 This commitment produced much consternation for early Anabaptists and Baptists who became convinced of believer’s baptism. How could they, who had been baptized as infants, rightly administer baptism and the Lord’s Supper before a congregation consisting of baptized believers existed? The uncomfortable solution they adopted was that one person must go first and be baptized as a believer by another person who was not a baptized believer. That first one would then baptize the rest.

9 Grenz, “Baptism and the Lord’s Supper,” 93.

10 Michael Taylor, “Include Them Out?” in Faith Bowers, ed., *Let Love Be Genuine* (London, UK: The Baptist Union, 1985), 47. This collection of essays is among the earliest reflections on disability and the Church produced by Baptists.

11 Stanley Hauerwas sees the Incarnation as the key to stretching our imagination. “The

humanity of that God," he writes, "has made it possible for a people to exist who do in fact, as Nietzsche suggested, exemplify a slave morality. It is a morality [David Bentley] Hart describes as a 'strange, impractical, altogether unworldly tenderness' expressed in the ability to see as our sisters and brothers the autistic or Down syndrome or disabled child, a child who is a perpetual perplexity for the world, a child who can cause pain and only fleetingly charm or delight." Stanley Hauerwas, "The Politics of the Church and the Humanity of God," ABC Religion and Ethics (June 19, 2012), www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2012/06/19/3528056.htm (accessed September 6, 2012).

12 For more on recognizing the giftedness of the profoundly mentally disabled, see Henri Nouwen's account of his close friend, teacher, and confidant, Adam Arnett, in *Adam: God's Beloved* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997). Adam was a profoundly disabled young man in the Daybreak Community. Though Adam was unable to care for himself or communicate, Nouwen came to understand their relationship as a deep friendship in which Adam articulated the deep mysteries of God simply in his presence.

13 I am grateful to my friend Scott Bullard for helping me to articulate this ideal.



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