



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 How the Tomb Becomes a Womb
(*Death*, pp. 11-18)

Suggested Article:

📖 Rebekah's Scheme
(*Death*, pp. 87-93)

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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How the Tomb Becomes a Womb

When we are born to new life in the 'maternal waters' of baptism, we celebrate and receive God's grace that shapes both how we live and how we die.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Romans 6:3-11

Meditation¹

[When you were baptized,] you died and were born in one and the same moment. This saving water was both tomb and womb. It is a strange thing, quite out of the ordinary.

For indeed, at the moment of Baptism we are not actually dead, we have not really been placed in the tomb, we are not actually brought back from the dead: by these ceremonies we seek to represent Christ's Passion.

Yet we are truly given new life.

Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 387)

Reflection

We rarely think of baptismal grace in the way Cyril of Jerusalem suggests – as announcing our deaths and preparing us for death by reorienting us to life as a gift from God. Perhaps, Eric Howell suggests, this is because we “construct walls around the baptismal moment, separating it from the rest of the Christian life that follows.” Instead, he recommends that we see within the act of baptism the shape of the whole Christian life.

“The Christian tradition variously describes baptism as a *sacrament* to highlight the mysterious work that God does through its practice, as an *ordinance* to emphasize our obedience to Jesus' command to perform it, and as a *sign* to indicate the symbolic nature of the lowering and raising of the candidate,” Howell explains. “Perhaps we should also describe baptism as an *augury*, for it is an omen of what will happen in the future. ... [In baptism] we can see the death and resurrection of Christ and our own death and resurrection.”

The grace of God that we receive, signify, and celebrate in baptism sustains us through our lives. “Life in the spirit means gradually becoming aware of 'baptismal grace,' and this awareness transforms the whole person,” Olivier Clement has written. “Each present moment has to become baptismal: a moment of anguish and death if I seek to cling to it and so experience its non-existence, but a moment of resurrection if I accept it humbly as 'present' in both senses of the word. ... We come finally to the moment of agony when we are overwhelmed by the waters of death. Through our baptism, according to the measure of our faith, they will be transformed into the womb of eternity.”²

Howell commends two practices that can suffuse our lives with awareness of this baptismal grace:

- ▶ *Remember our death daily.* It is ancient Christian wisdom that “we most fully experience life when we are most mindful of our deaths,” he notes. “We most fully experience baptismal grace when we contemplate the reality of death...because the grace that we will receive for resurrection upon our deaths is so richly augured in baptism.”



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- Continue to tell the 'story' of baptism in Christian funerals. "In the baptismal service the person is lowered into and then raised from the waters. In the funeral service the person is lowered into death to be raised to new life. Even as we trust that a baptized person will be raised from the water, so we trust that the person we lower into the ground will rise again," he writes. The power of Christ's resurrection, which is symbolized and experienced in the waters of baptism, is the basis of our hope for eternity. Howell concludes, "By God's grace may we come to receive both the watery grave and the earthen grave as blessed, as auguries of new life in Christ, and therefore as occasions for rejoicing in hope."

Study Questions

1. In his memoir of dying from cancer, *Chasing Delight*, Eugene O'Kelly wonders what life would have been like if his key insight—that life can become filled with the awareness of gift—had come to him years before his diagnosis, rather than weeks before his death. What would you say to him? How does remembering your baptism *deepen* and *strengthen* your understanding of life as a divine gift?
2. How does the communal practice of baptism shape our understanding of death and give meaning to it?
3. Tom Long has observed, "When a Christian dies, the church gathers to act out the story of what this death means in the light of the gospel, but it is a story that began long before the person died. It is a story that began at baptism." What themes from the baptismal service should be echoed in a Christian funeral?
4. In baptism, Cyril of Jerusalem notes, we are not literally buried, but we are raised to new life. How is his insight captured in the baptismal hymn, "Jesus, Our Lord and King"?

Departing Hymn: "Jesus, Our Lord and King" (verses 1, 2, and 4)

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

As dead indeed to sin,
we rise to walk anew,
henceforth, as not our own, but yours,
we follow only you.

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

Anonymous
Tune: ST. MICHAEL

1 *A New Beginning: Cyril of Jerusalem, Augustine, Tertullian* (Trowbridge, UK: Redwood Books, 1998), 47-48.

2 Olivier Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary* (New York: New City Press, 1993), 106.

How the Tomb Becomes a Womb

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 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider how the grace we celebrate and receive in baptism is an augury of the whole Christian life, which prepares us not only for living, but also for dying.
2. To discuss practices that help us become aware of this baptismal grace in relation to death.
3. To explore the relationship between the baptismal service and the Christian funeral.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Death (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Jesus, Our Lord and King” locate the familiar tune ST. MICHAEL in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with a Story

In the prime of his life, with an adoring family, good friends, and meaningful work as CEO of one of the largest accounting firms in the world, Eugene O’Kelly was diagnosed with a terminal brain tumor. In his memoir, *Chasing Delight*, he describes his diagnosis as a gift: “I was blessed. I was told I had three months to live.” He reports, “I’d attained a new level of awareness, one I didn’t possess the first 53 years of my life. It’s just about impossible for me to imagine going back to that other way of thinking, when this new way has enriched me so. I lost something precious, but I also gained something precious.”

In the shadow of death, O’Kelly experienced his life as a wonderful gift. On a human scale, perhaps, his insight is an analogue of the divine grace that we experience in baptism.

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 the grace that we celebrate and receive in baptism.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Romans 6:3-11 from a modern translation.

Meditation

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

Reflection

“As believers in Christ we enter God’s family by dying and being born again in baptism,” Charles Christian notes in his review article, “Restoring the Christian Funeral.” This study explores the profound theology of death that is implicit in baptism: we participate in Christ’s death and resurrection, and this establishes the form of the entire Christian pilgrimage. Baptism is a sacrament, ordinance, sign, and (Eric Howell helpfully explains) augury of the fact that life before God is a gift, which is mediated to us through the body of Christ, the Church.

As we absorb the meaning of this “baptismal grace,” we learn not only how to live, but also how to die. As members reflect on the communal experience of baptism—their own and others’ they have celebrated—encourage them to consider the parallel ways in which they witness and proclaim God’s grace in the service of baptism and in the Christian funeral.

Study Questions

1. Eric Howell interprets Eugene O’Kelly’s insight as an analogy, on the human plane, of the awareness of life as a divine gift that we are granted in baptism. As we participate in Christ’s death in baptism, we are “raised...so that we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4). Each time we remember our own or celebrate another’s baptism, we recall that Christ’s resurrection enables us to turn from sinful desires and habits, and to welcome God’s grace. We have not earned the wonderful life with God that we live through Christ’s body, the Church, but have received it as a gift. As we pattern our lives on this experience of baptismal grace—continually ‘dying’ to reliance on ourselves and trusting God’s gift of life—we develop habits of love that prepare us for trusting God in the process of our dying.
2. The *communal* nature of baptism reminds us that we are born for life with God within a community, and through the sacramental actions of that community, which is the body of Christ, the Church. Likewise, through every stage of the Christian journey, including the process of our dying, we are graced by God through the body of Christ. Further, the *obedient act* of baptism is our participation in the death of Jesus, so that we may also rise with him. Christ’s resurrection, for which baptismal immersion is a fitting *symbol*, is our promise that after death we will be raised, like him, to new life with God.
3. “The funeral service echoes the baptismal service,” Eric Howell writes. “In both cases the congregation celebrates and receives God’s grace for a person’s life shaped by dying and rising. In the baptismal service the person is lowered into and then raised from the waters. In the funeral service the person is lowered into death to be raised to new life. Even as we trust that a baptized person will be raised from the water, so we trust that the person we lower into the ground will rise again.”

In “Restoring the Christian Funeral” Charles Christian says a funeral service should trace how the deceased believer’s story became “intertwined with God’s redemptive story.” Like baptism, the funeral is a communal act that does not ignore, but rather honors the believer’s body. Christian writes, “the funeral of a believer revolves around telling two stories: the sad story of the severing of earthly bonds between the deceased brother or sister and the community, and the hope-filled story of Christ’s resurrection that allows the deceased brother or sister to be carried ‘to the arms of God.’”

Encourage members to discuss elements of funeral services that best exemplify the communal nature of the believer’s life in Christ, the grief that rightly accompanies severed relationships, and the hope which is grounded in Christ’s resurrection.

4. “Jesus, Our Lord and King” is a prayer to Christ. Each verse borrows a phrase from the Apostle Paul to depict how believers “*represent* Christ’s Passion,” as Cyril says, in the act of baptism: “to you our bodies we present/a living sacrifice” (from Romans 12:1), we are “dead indeed to sin” (Romans 6:11), and we are “Baptized into your death” (Romans 6:3). Believers do not literally die, but they offer themselves to God as a *living* sacrifice (verse 1), become *dead...to sin* (verse 2), and are baptized into *your* (Christ’s) death (verse 3).

However, believers are literally raised to a new life. It is characterized by giving “praise” to Jesus as “our Lord and King” (verse 1), living “as not our own, but yours” as we “follow only you” (verse 2), and living “a life of faith” with changed concerns that result in “new and endless joys” (verse 3).

Departing Hymn

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