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A WORD TO THE CHURCH ON BAPTISM: (1986)

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For over seven years the Commission on Theology of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) has been at work seeking to develop a comprehensive statement on the nature and calling of the church. The overall goal has been to bring new insight and deeper understanding to what it means to be the church in witnessing faithfully to the Gospel in our world today.

Each year the Commission has taken up a specific theme: in 1979, we began by looking at the theological foundations of *The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)* and what it means to be a covenant community. In 1980, the Commission addressed the important issues of mission and evangelism. The next topic explored was the nature of authority in the church. In 1983, the Commission turned to examine the theme of ministry, with particular focus on the ordained ministry.

The fifth topic taken up has been that of baptism. In 1985, Clark Williamson, professor of Systematic Theology at Christian Theological Seminary, presented a major paper on the historical and theological development of baptism among Disciples to the Commission. (This material is now published in expanded form by the Christian Board of Publication, 1986, as the fourth volume in the series on "The Nature of the Church".) After thorough discussion of the central issues and major concerns related to baptism for Disciples at its 1985 and 1986 meetings, the Commission now sends forth this "Word to the Church" for study and response across the life of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

This report should be read as a contribution to an *emerging theology of baptism among Disciples*. It calls us back to our roots as a people who have borne witness to the importance of believers' baptism as it invites us to consider deeper theological and biblical understandings of the crucial relationship in baptism between God's gift of grace and our human response of faith.

In an attempt to draw out the implications of the theological work on baptism, a "Service for the Celebration of Baptism" is included at the conclusion of this "Word to the Church". All Disciples pastors and congregations are invited to use this liturgy in future services of baptism.

Any comments or reactions from across the life of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to this "Word on Baptism" and to the "Service of Celebration" will be deeply appreciated. Please respond to: Council on Christian Unity, P. O. Box 1986, Indianapolis, Indiana 46206

I. Baptism in the New Testament

As Disciples of Christ, we have always sought to derive our interpretations of the meaning and practice of Christian baptism from the understandings of the early church as reflected in the New Testament. This has led some Disciples to think that the New Testament clearly discloses the baptismal practice of the early church and that in the New Testament interpretations of the meaning of baptism were relatively unimportant. Study of the New Testament, however, requires a more careful reading of the texts regarding baptism. On the one hand, New Testament texts on baptism offer a rich diversity in their interpretations of its meaning. On the other hand, the New Testament contains very little information about how early Christians actually practiced baptism. After all, the writers of the New Testament had no need to describe their practice since their communities would have known how baptism was carried out in various locales. By contrast, explaining the meaning and significance of Christian baptism was crucial, for ritual washings were common in Judaism as well as in other Greco-Roman religions, making it essential to distinguish the baptism of Christians.

Early Christian *interpretations* of baptism often trace Christian baptism to the life of Jesus. We find within the New Testament two important claims about the baptism of Jesus. First, the gospel writers include Jesus among those baptized in the renewal movement led by John the Baptist. The gospel writers testify to Jesus' baptism, and they locate in that event divine approval of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry (Mark 1:9-11, Matthew 3:13-17, Luke 3:21-22, John 1:29-34).

Along with this baptism by John, gospel tradition also identifies Jesus' death as a form of baptism. In Mark and Luke, Jesus anticipates his death and refers to it as "the baptism with which I am baptized" (Mark 10:38-40, Luke 12:50). Some scholars also see in John's gospel an allusion to the baptism of Jesus' death when, at his crucifixion, both blood and water flow from his pierced side (John 19:34).

The early Christian interpretation of baptism best known to Disciples connects itself with Jesus' baptism by John. John's baptism for forgiveness is recalled in Acts, when Peter's Pentecost sermon urges baptism: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you

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and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him." (Acts 2:38-39). Throughout Acts, baptism follows repentance in response to the preaching of the gospel (Acts 8:12, 9:18, etc.; cf. I Peter 3:21). While the leaders of the church administer baptism, Acts makes it clear that baptism stems from the grace of God (see, for example, Acts 10:44-48, where the gift of the Holy Spirit falls on Cornelius and his household, persuading Peter that he must not withhold baptism).

By contrast with Acts, which primarily sees baptism as bringing about the forgiveness of sins, Paul interprets baptism as incorporation. He identifies the baptism of believers with that of Jesus at his crucifixion: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4). For Paul, the gift of baptism confers on the individual both a new identity and a new community. The baptized, by being baptized into Christ or into the name of Christ (I Corinthians 1:13), Galatians 3:27), receive a new identity.

Paul's frequent references to baptism in Christ have almost spatial connotation. Believers are moved from one sphere (the old age, the power of sin) to another sphere in which God's reign is being made manifest. It is for this reason that Paul can speak of being purchased by God (I Corinthians 7:23) or being seized by Christ (Philippians 3:12). Believers belong to Christ in his death and receive the promise that they also will belong to Christ when his power is revealed to all of creation (I Corinthians 15:20-28). The second century Christian leader Ignatius captured this sense of belonging well when he wrote that Christians are "stamped with the Father's name." (cf. Matthew 28:19).

While baptism involves the individual, baptism does not leave the individual isolated but firmly placed within a new community. It is not accidental that Paul refers to baptism when he addresses believers at Corinth about their quarrels and dissensions (I Corinthians 1:10-17, 12:13). Believers constitute one body *because* they are baptized *into* one body. It is on this basis that Paul can and does attack the notion that individual gifts or individual behaviors influence only the life of the individual.

In these early generations, then, baptism was not merely a rite of initiation. On the contrary, it marked a radical break in the life of the believer. New Testament writers recognize that growth and maturity occur after baptism, but they nevertheless see baptism as incorporation into Christ which has profound implications for the individual (Galatians 3:27-28).

These texts and others challenge Disciples to recover the *significance* of baptism, but they offer little assistance to us as we consider our *practice* of baptism. While it is true that the narratives of Acts name only adults who are baptized, it is also important to recall that in Acts 2:39, Peter announces God's promise "to you and to your children." In addition, Acts refers to the baptism of entire households (Acts 10:23-48, 16:25-34), a baptism which may have included infants, since all those dependent on the head of a house were regarded as part of a household. I Corinthians 7:14, which refers to the sanctification of children by their parents' faith may indicate that infants were baptized.

Difficulties also arise concerning the method of baptism. The Greek verb *baptizein* (to baptize) has connotations of washing or immersion, but it is impossible to conclude from this use of the word what actual early Christian practice may have been. The difficulties involved in reconstructing early Christian practice become clear when we acknowledge the variety of practices referred to in the New Testament itself. Some Christians receive the gift of the Holy Spirit prior to baptism (Acts 10:44-48, 11:15-18), while others receive the Spirit only after baptism (Acts 8:14-17). Some who are called disciples apparently still practice the baptism of John (Acts 19:1-7). According to Paul, some even practice baptism on behalf of the dead (I Corinthians 15:29). Our earliest evidence of actual practice may come from the *Didache*, an early Christian manual of instruction, which states that running water should be used if available but, in the absence of running water, water should be poured on the head of the baptismal candidate. While the *Didache* is not scriptural, it does indicate that at least for one early Christian community, immersion is the preferred but not the only form of baptism.

As in our considerations of other elements of Christian faith and practice, it is important to ask what sort of guidance the Bible provides for us regarding baptism (See "A Word to the Church on Authority"). Writers of the biblical texts proclaimed God's word as a challenge to their generations, and we are likewise obliged not merely to repeat those formulations but to ask how God's word addresses us. On the issue of baptism, it is clear that the New Testament is far more interested in what baptism signifies about new life than in the age of the candidate or the manner of baptism. While Paul speaks of the importance of baptism, he clearly subordinates it to the proclamation of the Gospel. Indeed, baptism is only important as it is a proclamation of the gospel (I Cor. 1:17). It is essential for Disciples to learn from this priority if we are to reclaim and hand on the meaning of baptism in this generation.

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II. The Disciples' Baptismal Heritage

Alexander Campbell and those associated with him in the beginnings of the Disciples' movement understood themselves as continuing the work begun by Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Indeed, Campbell's followers called themselves "reformers." Nowhere is this self-understanding of the early Disciples clearer than in their views of the theology and practice of baptism. Accordingly this overview of the Disciples' tradition with regard to baptism begins with the Reformation.

Luther regarded baptism (along with the Lord's Supper) as a sacrament because in it there are combined two things: the promise of God's gracious forgiveness of our sins and a concrete sign (water and the action of baptizing). The chief point about baptism, for Luther, is the grace of God: "the divine promise, which says: 'He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved' (Mark 16:16)." Baptism is not a "good work" and justifies no one; "rather, faith in the word of the promise to which baptism was conjoined, is what justifies, and so completes, that which the baptism signified." The point of baptism, what Campbell would later call the "design" of it, has everything to do with God's grace and faith as the appropriate response to it.

Secondly, Luther held that because baptism symbolizes death and resurrection as the fulfilling and completion of justification, immersion is the form which gives "the sign of baptism as fully and completely as possible." However, according to Luther, immersion is not necessary (although it is preferable), that is, it is not the only legitimate form of baptism. He argued that to withhold baptism from children would imply that the good news depends on our ability to receive it, which would be works-righteousness all over again. He held to his position because of his emphasis that justification is by grace through faith and because infant baptism well reflects our dependence on God's grace. The later Disciples will agree with Luther that the form — what Campbell called the "mode" of baptism — should be immersion, but would stress the importance of the response of faith in such a way as to exclude infant baptism. In this, they understood themselves to be carrying the insights of the Reformation through to a more consistent practice.

Campbell's most thorough discussion of baptism occurs in *The Christian System*, in a chapter that opens with this remark: "Luther said that the doctrine of justification, or forgiveness, was the test of a standing or falling church... We agree with him in this..." In *The Millennial Harbinger* of 1847 he called baptism "a sort of embodiment of the gospel." Of it, he remarked: "We do not place baptism amongst good works... In baptism we are passive in everything but in giving our consent." This discussion of grace, justification, and forgiveness is all part of what Campbell called the "meaning" or "design," the "end" (purpose) of baptism. It is clear throughout his writings on baptism, from his often repeated declarations, that the design of baptism — justification by grace — is by far the most important point to be understood.

Campbell also stressed two other points about baptism. They were that the proper *subject* for baptism is a penitent believer — not an infant or child and not merely an adult, but a *believer* — and that the proper, indeed the only proper, *mode* of baptism is immersion in water, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Campbell held to these views for a set of clearly stated reasons. First, the New Testament appeared to Campbell to be silent on any form of baptism other than that of baptizing believing adults. Second, the meaning of the word *baptizein*, so Campbell contended, seemed perfectly clear: immersion is the only possible way to interpret it. Third, he was trying to reform the church and he saw the combination between the state-church and infant baptism as nothing less than disastrous. The uncritical absorption of a whole populace into the church results in the loss of any distinction between the church and the world. Referring to a period in Scottish history when the whole nation was baptized, he states that "all the enormities great evils committed in the realm were committed by members of the church." If the church is to be "a peculiar people," Campbell concluded, infant baptism indiscriminately practiced must be replaced with baptism of penitent believers.

Stone's views of baptism were much the same as Campbell's. In his autobiography he tells how he came to the view that "baptism was ordained for the remission of sins, and ought to be administered in the name of Jesus to all believing penitents." As had Campbell, Stone grounded his views on the Reformation principles *sola gratia*, *sola fide* (by grace alone, by faith alone). "No good works," says Stone, "no qualifications are previously required" — not even the emotionally wrenching experiences of people in frontier revivals.

Stone was also similar to Campbell in holding the view that baptism should not be administered indiscriminately. He maintained that "the church must exercise care to determine whether applicants for baptism are true penitents if it is to remain a church." And Stone also thought that immersion is the proper form (mode) of baptism, although he refused to make this question a test of fellowship and communion.

The subsequent discussion of baptism among Disciples has tended to suffer from a lack of adequate understanding of Campbell and Stone. The era from Campbell's death in 1866 to the early 20th century saw the hardening of their views into a new dogma. This period, referred to as the time

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of Disciples scholasticism, compares to the generation of the founders as 17th-century Protestant scholasticism compares to the 16th-century reformers. Dynamic encounter with grace became calcified into formulas. This epoch of Disciples development corresponded to the rise of fundamentalism in America and was influenced by it.

In the era of Disciples scholasticism, the only baptismal issue was that of the mode of baptism — immersion. Although Campbell was more insistent upon immersion than was Stone, nonetheless he subordinated it in importance to the meaning of baptism (the remission of sins), to the subject of baptism (penitent believers), and to the ecclesial character of baptism (in baptism the church constitutes itself and therefore baptism should not be indiscriminately practiced). As the movement became legalistic all this tended to be forgotten for the sake of an exclusive emphasis on immersion. Consequently much of the reaction of liberal Disciples to Disciples fundamentalism was similarly distorted.

The task for Disciples today is the critical reappropriation of the fullness of their tradition in the context of the wider ecumenical discussion with a willingness to learn from others and a modest confidence that the Disciples tradition itself, at its best, is a distinctive theological contribution to the larger church.

Particularly we should reappropriate the following from our tradition: (1) a witness to the importance of believers' baptism as yes-saying to God's grace, (2) a concern with the life of both individual Christians and the church as pointing to the way of life that the church is to represent to the world, (3) a commitment to baptism as the sacrament of unity, and (4) the priority of God's Grace. We should also be aware of the social and historical relativity of our tradition and should particularly seek to avoid all "works-righteousness," that is, we may not make believers' baptism a condition of receiving God's grace, apart from which God is not free to be a gracious God. This would go entirely against the grain of the Disciples' heritage.

III. The Nature of Baptism

Baptism is a public act by which the church proclaims God's grace, as revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through the use of a visible sign of God's gracious initiative and the human individual's response in faith. With other Christians we affirm that as baptism is at once divine gift and human response, it marks the beginning of the Christian life and looks toward lifelong growth into the fullness of faith.

Baptism, as a gift of grace, received by faith, expresses its meaning in a variety of images. Baptism is new birth (John 3:5); it is God's gift of life — a radical new beginning. Baptism is a washing with water (I Corinthians 6:11); it is a cleansing from sin — a sign of God's forgiving grace. Baptism is putting on clothing (Galatians 3:27); it is to put on Christ — it is to receive a new identity. Baptism is death and resurrection in unity with Christ (Romans 6:3-11); it is the crucifixion of the old, separate self, and the resurrection to new life in the body of Christ. Baptism conveys the gift of the Spirit (Acts 2:38); it is the power of new life now and the pledge of life in the age to come (II Corinthians 1:22). In marking a new identity with Christ, baptism is a mandate for discipleship; as part of the Christian community in service to the world. Thus, the meaning of baptism is grounded in God's redemptive action in Christ, it incorporates the believer in the community in the body of Christ and it anticipates life in the coming age when the powers of the old world will be overcome, and the purposes of God will triumph (I Corinthians 15:28).

Traditionally, Disciples have preferred to call baptism an ordinance rather than a sacrament. The term "sacrament" seemed to represent a kind of sacramentalism which understood the sacraments as the exclusive channels of God's grace, and the special prerogative of a sacerdotal hierarchy. However, Disciples have increasingly come to recognize that the term "ordinance" is subject to misunderstanding whereby the ordinances are taken as orders to be legalistically obeyed, and thus transformed into human works rather than signs of God's grace. A proper understanding indicates that a sacrament is an expression of God's grace in a visible sign. In the case of baptism, the sign is an act of using water — a common element, essential for life. Therefore, baptism can be appropriately called a sacrament or an ordinance of the church. It may be called a sacrament of the church because in this sign the grace of God is made focally present. It may be called an ordinance of the church because as God's gift by which persons are formally incorporated into the body of Christ, it is one means by which the church orders its life and distinguishes itself from the world.

Most churches involved in the ecumenical movement acknowledge the two essential elements — divine grace and human response — constitutive of the meaning of baptism. Their baptismal practices, however, represent differing views of the way the act may properly be said to relate grace and faith.

Churches that practice "infant baptism" stress the gracious initiative of God, while also affirming that a response of faith is made by the parents and community at the time of baptism and by the individual at a later moment through confirmation. Churches that practice "believers' baptism" stress the significance of the individual decision of faith at the time of baptism, while also affirming the priority of God's grace.

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Each practice reflects something of the full meaning of baptism, but each practice also risks the loss of part of that full meaning. The strength of infant baptism is that it bears powerful witness to the fact that God alone is the author of our salvation. It runs the risk, however, that people may minimize the individual decision of faith. The strength of believers' baptism is that it bears powerful witness to the need for an individual decision of faith. It runs the risk, however, that people may minimize the priority of God's grace and thus lapse into works righteousness, i.e., the idea that one's faith is a pre-condition for grace.

Whatever their practice, churches may lose sight of the responsibility placed upon the individual and the community by the act of baptism. Traditions practicing infant baptism may engage in an "indiscriminate baptism" in which the church does not take seriously the responsibility for nurturing baptized children to mature commitment in Christ. Traditions practicing believers' baptism are subject to a similar danger if baptism becomes a routine practice without authentic decision on the part of the child, adolescent, or adult. Traditions practicing believers' baptism have tended not to view children as a part of the church's membership and have, at times, not adequately recognized the church's responsibility to nurture unbaptized children toward the decision of faith. Traditions practicing infant baptism have, at times, understood the act as an elimination of original sin in such a way that the call to lifelong discipleship is weakened.

In light of the meaning of baptism, and considering the strengths and dangers of baptismal practices, we recognize that both infant and believers' baptism can be authentic practices in the one church of Jesus Christ. We affirm in line with the Disciples' tradition, that believers' baptism is, for us, the normative (standard) practice inasmuch as in this one act both God's gift of grace and the human response to that gift find focused expression. We likewise affirm that as baptism marks a new identity in Jesus Christ, whose ministry is that of self-giving service, so the baptized Christian enters into a life of self-giving service, and the church is called to nurture proper understandings and proper expressions of the manifold ethical dimensions of baptism.

Baptism has crucial significance for Christian conduct and obedience. In baptism, we died to sin and are raised to newness of life. Since we are dead to sin, we must not let sin reign in our bodies (Romans 6:2-12). When we are baptized into Christ, we become members of a new community where God's righteousness reigns and the old distinctions which divide and disrupt human life are destroyed (Gal. 3:28). In baptism, we receive the gift of the Spirit, which empowers us to walk by the Spirit and bear the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-25). In baptism we are united with Christ so as to share his suffering and participate in his ministry of obedient service. There is a great need in our era to rediscover the relationship between sacrament and service, between baptism and participation in God's mission in and for the world. As the World Council of Churches' *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* text puts it, baptism should not only call us to personal sanctification but should also "motivate Christians to strive for the realization of the will of God in all realms of life."

IV. Areas for Renewal and Growth in Disciples Theology and Practice of Baptism

In light of the preceding discussion on the nature and meaning of baptism, the Commission on Theology has identified three areas to which further attention needs to be given by Disciples in the future.

A. Rebaptism

The Commission on Theology endorses the ecumenical convergence regarding rebaptism which states that, "baptism is administered only once" (COCU, VI, 12) and that congregations should avoid "any practice that could be interpreted as rebaptism." (BEM, "Baptism", 13). There are many reasons for such imperative language: (1) since baptism depends on God's grace and not simply on the "readiness" or "worthiness" of the person, rebaptism calls into question what God has done in that moment (whether or not we "remember" it); (2) rebaptism questions the sacramental integrity of other churches; (3) baptism marks incorporation into the one church and not simply into any one denomination; and, (4) baptism is not a momentary experience, but marks the beginning of a lifelong growth in Christ. It is important, therefore, that baptism be "continually and responsibly reaffirmed." (COCU, VI, 13).

The application of these principles becomes difficult for Disciples when an individual who has been baptized as an infant enters a new stage of faith and witness, and requests believers' baptism as the effective sign of renewal and commitment. A similar problem emerges when those who received believers' baptism become derelict and then return to the fold.

Genuine pastoral concern to give meaning and direction to the reconversion experience may be met in various ways other than repeating the baptismal sacrament. Reaffirmation of the baptismal faith is not a private affair but includes the support and concern of the community of believers in response to the continuing manifestation of the abundant grace of God.

In many instances this may mean sharpening our awareness of the renewal that comes with participation in the Lord's Supper. Opportunity for rededication may be incorporated with the invitation to Discipleship following the sermon. In other instances, rejoining the fellowship of the committed

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is symbolized by receiving the "right hand of fellowship". Pastors and responsible persons and groups within each congregation (committees on worship, evangelism, etc.) may carefully assess how they reaffirm those who come from other churches and those who renew their commitment in service to God.

Various services for the renewal of baptismal faith are being developed around the country. These may be obtained from the Council on Christian Unity.

B. Baptism and the Meaning of Membership

Another issue which confronts Disciples is our pastoral responsibility to help all members to clarify our fundamental identity in Jesus Christ and to integrate the various meanings of church membership that impact our lives and witness:

- Christians are members of a local congregation which identify them with that particular fellowship and compel certain obligations for the care of that fellowship.
- Christians are members of the global church which calls for identification with people of diverse cultures, circumstances, ideologies and national interests. This identification also compels certain obligations to be informed about and share with the Christian family in its pluriform settings.
- Christians are members of a rich heritage reaching back through the history of the churches into biblical traditions all the way to creation, a heritage marked by both faithfulness and faithlessness in each generation. This identity compels certain obligations to know the contours of this heritage in appreciation for the pioneers of faith as well as guidance for our present context.
- Christians are members of the unfolding drama of God's kingdom, the lure of which constantly enables the individual to remold loyalties, values, and intentions. This identity compels an obligation to seek both justice and righteousness both as an individual and for the whole human community.

In baptism we are identified with the church local and global, past and future. From our baptism Christians grow through transformation of loyalties into citizenship of God's kingdom.

C. The Teaching of Baptism

It is hard to overemphasize the importance of effective instruction of the candidates for baptism. Such instruction, normally the responsibility of the local pastor, should deal with the meaning of baptism and its implications for the life of the candidate such as those addressed in this document. What does it mean to accept the grace of God? What does it mean to be incorporated into the universal Church? Special attention should also be given to teaching in regard to the words of the baptismal service; for example, if the following service is used, attention should be given to such questions as: What does it mean to repent of sin and to renounce the false gods of this world? What does it mean to confess that Jesus is the Christ and to say that through baptism we participate in his death and resurrection? What does it mean to commit one's self to grow in a life of Christian discipleship? What does it mean to affirm that this service is not simply a human ceremony but an act of God?

These questions remind us that the themes and symbols of baptism take us to the very heart of the Christian faith. A baptism is, thus, an important teaching opportunity during which the whole community may be encouraged to deepen its understanding of what it means to be Christian.

In addition to adequate instruction for baptismal candidates, Disciples are becoming more aware that the preaching/teaching life of the church must include regular and intentional reminders about the meaning of baptism. In our baptism we were not only received into the family of God but also ordained into the ministry of reconciliation. Therefore, continual reminders of this life-long vocation, inaugurated at Baptism, are needed to sustain our commitment and nourish us on the journey. The rich variety of imagery used by the New Testament writers to describe the meaning of baptism suggests abundant themes for educational settings in the church. Apart from the actual baptismal event, there are numerous other times within the life of the church for intentionally recalling our incorporation into the Body of Christ.

CELEBRATION OF BAPTISM INTRODUCTION

Baptism, as the sacrament through which one is formally incorporated into the Church, should be administered, whenever possible, during public worship (including the celebration of the Lord's Supper). This enables the members of the congregation to welcome the newly baptized person(s) into the body of Christ, to be reminded of their own baptismal vows, and to pledge themselves to be a community of continuing nurture.

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The baptismal liturgy may come either 1) between the opening prayers and the proclamation of the Word through the reading of scripture and preaching, or 2) between the sermon and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The latter is theologically more appropriate, signifying that baptism is a response to the Word of God and an entry into the eucharistic community. The former has the practical advantage of allowing the newly-baptized persons more time to dress before returning to the congregation to participate in the Lord's Supper.

The normal Disciples practice of assigning baptism to the pastor of the congregation is to be encouraged since such persons are set apart for representative, sacramental leadership and symbolize the universal connectedness of Christ's Church. Few churches now contend, however, that the validity of baptism depends on the status of the celebrant. In situations where an ordained minister is unavailable, others (e.g., congregational elders) have authority to baptize.

Most orders of baptism (especially in this age of liturgical renewal throughout the Church) include the following elements:

- a proclamation of scripture(s) concerning baptism,
- an expression of repentance and a renunciation of evil,
- a profession of faith in Jesus Christ,
- an invocation of the Holy Spirit,
- the use of water (normally complete immersion in Disciples' practice),
- a declaration, following Matthew 28:19, that the baptism is administered in the name of the Trinity,
- expressions of welcome into the Church.

The following order of service, based on the preceding theological discussion, is intended as but one possible model for use in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). The words of the service are said by the celebrating minister unless otherwise noted. The first three sections of the baptismal service should take place near the congregation — perhaps on the steps of the chancel — in order to underscore the participation and support of the worshiping community. Following the baptismal prayer, the congregation may sing a hymn or hymns as the celebrant and candidate(s) prepare for the actual baptism. It would be appropriate for the candidate(s) to be already robed, a sign of "putting on" a new life in Christ, during the first part of the liturgy. This would also make for a quicker transition to the baptism. Otherwise, the candidate(s) will need to robe during the hymn.

ORDER OF SERVICE

I. Declaration of the Meaning of Baptism

Refer to Commentary Note (1)

Baptism is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ. Through baptism, we are brought into union with Christ and with his Church around the world and across the ages. Through baptism, we participate in Christ's own death and resurrection. Through baptism, we assume a new identity, committing ourselves to a life of love and righteousness.

As we approach this profound moment in the life of the Church and of this these individual(s), let us remember the many dimensions of baptism revealed to us in scripture.

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:3-4).

"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28).

"And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him'" (Acts 2:38-39).

Finally, we recall how Jesus himself, baptized by John in the waters of the Jordan, commanded his followers to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

II. Renunciation of Evil and Profession of Faith

Refer to Commentary Notes (2)

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(The celebrant invites the person(s) and their sponsors to come forward.)

____ N _____, the community gathered here welcomes you with great joy to this holy celebration! Baptism is both God's gift and our human response to that gift. We pray for the transforming presence of God's Spirit and we ask that you respond to God's grace by repenting of your sins, by renouncing evil, by affirming your faith, and by committing yourself selves to grow in a life of Christian discipleship.

M: do you repent of sin and earnestly pray for God's healing forgiveness?

B: I do.

M: Do you renounce being ruled by the false gods of this world — the snare of pride, the love of money, the power of violence?

B: I do renounce them.

M: Do you, with Christians of every time and place, believe that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God" (Matthew 16:16)?

B: I do so believe.

M: Will you strive, with God's help, to follow Christ through faithful witness and loving service as part of his body, the Church, all the days of your life lives?

B: I will so strive.

M: Will you, the community here gathered, continue to uphold _____ N _____ with your prayers and your witness in remembrance of your own baptism?

C: We will.

III. Baptismal Prayer

[Refer to Commentary Notes (3)]

Gracious God, we thank you that in every age you have made water a sign of your presence. In the beginning your Spirit brooded over the waters and they became the source of all creation. You led your people Israel through the waters of the Red Sea to their new land of freedom and hope. In the waters of the Jordan, your Son was baptized by John and anointed with your Spirit for his ministry of reconciliation. May this same Spirit bless the water we use today, that it may be a fountain of deliverance and new creation. Wash away the sins of those who enter it. Embrace them in the arms of your Church. Pour out your Spirit on them that they may be ministers of reconciling love. Make them one with Christ, buried and raised in the power of his resurrection, in whose name we pray. Amen.

IV. Baptism

(The celebrant leads each candidate into the baptism and lowers him or her backward into the water after saying the following words:)

By the authority of Jesus Christ, I baptize you, _____ N _____, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

[Refer to Commentary Notes (4)]

V. Welcome

(This may come immediately after the baptism or at the time of the Lord's Supper, at which those newly baptized should be specially served.)

M: _____ N _____ God has blessed you with the Spirit and received you by baptism into the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

C: We welcome you into the bonds of Christian fellowship! Together, with Christians of all races and nations, we are members of Christ's body, united by Christ's blood into one family of faith.

M: Through baptism you have put on Christ, passing from darkness into light.

C: May you grow in the knowledge and love of God. May your faith shine as a light to the world. [Refer to Commentary Notes (5).]

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Commentary Notes

The sequence suggested here calls for the first three sections to occur near the congregation, followed by a transition to the baptistry. Obviously there is nothing absolute about such a recommendation; such factors as architecture will (and should) play a role in determining what is most appropriate for each congregation. In some buildings the baptistry is so centrally located that the entire service could be conducted there without losing a sense of immediate community participation. Other pastors will want to move to the baptistry following the renunciation and confession in order that the prayer is said over the water itself. (In other churches the baptistry is separate from the sanctuary, making it difficult even to hold baptisms during regular Sunday worship.)

(1) The opening lines of the "declaration" are drawn from the World Council of Churches' theological convergence document, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* (BEM), paragraphs 2, 3, and 6 in the baptism section, and from the Consultation on Church Union's COCU Consensus, Chapter 6, paragraph 10. The major breakthrough represented by BEM may be the willingness of churches to acknowledge that the biblical witness regarding the meaning of baptism is richer than their separated traditions have taught. The passages used above lift up multiple images or meanings which yet point to a single reality.

Acts 2:38 and 2:39 have been used polemically by advocates of, respectively, believers' and infant baptism. They should be read together as a corrective to such polemics. The bracketed words in that passage are omitted for liturgical purposes in the *Inclusive Language Lectionary*.

(2) The practice of sponsors, foreign to most Disciples, has much to commend it. These persons commit themselves to a special nurturing responsibility for the baptismal candidate, thus signifying (a) the community's role in the response of faith and (b) the necessity of continual growth in faith after baptism.

The opening words of this section remind the candidate(s) and congregation that baptism is both a gift of grace and a response of faith, and prepare them for the questions that follow. The renunciation, focusing on contemporary forms of idolatry, is adapted from Max Thurian, "An Ecumenical Baptismal Liturgy", in *Baptism, Eucharist: Ecumenical Convergence in Celebration*. If the language of this renunciation seems too abstract (the "snare of pride, the love of money...") then it is possible to make it more direct (e.g., "Do you turn away from the false gods of this world — loving yourself more than God and neighbor, loving things more than God or each other, ...").

The typical form of the Good Confession used in Disciples' congregations is "Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and do you take him as your Lord and Savior?" While such a formulation has the advantage of stating an intimate relationship between Jesus and the believer, it has at least two drawbacks: First, it opens the way for the saving work of Christ to be construed as an individualistic relationship with little regard for the corporate and cosmic dimensions of salvation. Second, it is the language of nineteenth-century revivalism and not of scripture. It is recommended that the candidate(s) repeat Peter's simple confession as it appears in Matthew. Such a profession should be included in the baptismal liturgy in order not to separate the saving initiative of God through the Spirit from our personal appropriation of its benefits through trusting response.

Disciples insist that creeds articulated in the history of the Church not be made "tests of fellowship" at the time of baptism. Persons come to this decision of faith, however, within the context of the universal Church and of local communities whose faith is more fully developed than the simple confession of Peter. Thus, the candidate(s) might appropriately join with the whole congregation at some other point in the worship service in recitation of a broader confession of faith (especially the Apostles' Creed, a baptismal confession from the early Church).

(3) A prayer asking God to bless the water and recalling God's use of water in the history of salvation is standard in Roman Catholic and Anglican baptismal liturgies and is increasingly common among Protestants. As Keith Watkins points out, one reason for this prayer "is that it makes explicit that water is not the effective agent. Nor is the faith of the one being baptized. Nor is the power of the Church what makes the change. Rather, God who is invoked in this prayer brings about the new birth" (unpublished manuscript). The strong emphasis in BEM on the activity of the Holy Spirit is, likewise, an affirmation that baptism is not a magic ritual (something we do) or a human initiation ceremony, but, most fundamentally, an act of God.

(4) There is objection in parts of the Church to the masculine imagery of this traditional trinitarian formula (from Matthew 28:19). There are also defenders who see "Father" as an intimate description of our relationship with God, given us by Jesus, and who regard its use in baptism as an expression of continuity with the apostolic Church. The issue is a significant one and cannot be resolved in this service. It is important to remember, however, that substitute formulas may raise other problems, and that all human language about God is symbolic and must be used carefully.

(5) The welcome described in this section is a focused, public expression of the informal and non-liturgical welcome normally extended by Disciples congregations following the worship service.

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Some Disciples congregations are discovering that various symbolic acts, such as the anointing with oil as a sign of the gift of the Spirit or the giving of a candle as a sign of passing from darkness into light, can reinforce the significance of the ceremony as well as give powerful expression to its meaning. Other congregations extend "the right hand of fellowship" as a gesture of welcome into this community of faith.

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