



## **“Better Together – Water + Spirit”**

*Matthew 28:16–20; Acts 18:24–28; 1 Corinthians 12:4–26*

### ***One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One Spirit***

We turn this week to water and God’s Holy Spirit; the Christian practice of baptism binds these together. The United Methodist Church’s commission on baptism helps us to grasp the significance of this practice:

Baptism is a crucial threshold that we cross on our journey in faith. But there are many others, including the final transition from death to life eternal. Through baptism we are incorporated into the ongoing history of Christ’s mission, and we are identified and made participants in God’s new history in Jesus Christ and the new age that Christ is bringing. We await the final moment of grace, when Christ comes in victory at the end of the age to bring all who are in Christ into the glory of that victory. Baptism has significance in time and gives meaning to the end of time. In it we have a vision of a world recreated and humanity transformed and exalted by God’s presence. We are told that in this new heaven and new earth there will be no temple, for even our churches and services of worship will have had their time and ceased to be, in the presence of God, "the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (Revelation 21-22)...

Baptism is at the heart of the gospel of grace and at the core of the church’s mission. When we baptize we say what we understand as Christians about ourselves and our community: that we are loved into being by God, lost because of sin, but redeemed and saved in Jesus Christ to live new lives in anticipation of his coming again in glory. Baptism is an expression of God’s love for the world, and the effects of baptism also express God’s grace. As baptized people of God, we therefore respond with praise and thanksgiving, praying that God’s will be done in our own lives.

From the earliest days, Christians baptized new members of the community, though usually only after a three-year long period of catechesis. These people had been born anew and needed to learn how to live out this rebirth and to understand it, for baptism had been commanded by Jesus before his return to the Father (Matthew 28:16-20). Though misconceptions about baptism must have been common (Acts 18: 24-28), the Christian house churches came to understand that the same Holy Spirit who arrived on Pentecost now dwelt in them corporately and individually...Water + Spirit.

### ***Teaching baptism in Ephesus***

As Luke tells us in Acts 18, a well-meaning Jew named Apollos came to Ephesus (AD51?) teaching about Jesus and God’s kingdom as best he could. But his teachings about Jesus were a little confused and inaccurate. Priscilla and her husband, Aquila, who had worked alongside Paul in Corinth, took Apollos aside and taught him the full truth about Jesus and the new way. With their guidance and encouragement, Apollos went on to be an effective teacher and leader among the churches in Greece (see Acts 18:24-28). N. T. Wright reflects on this encounter:

But what was it that Apollos did not know, and so did not teach accurately, when he first arrived in Ephesus? How could such an evidently highly educated and intelligent man, who knew his Bible, knew about John’s baptism, and knew the facts about Jesus and taught them accurately—how could he be missing out on something vital, something which Aquila and Priscilla knew and he didn’t? It is true that Luke may well have included this little snippet in order to introduce the next story about Paul discovering some disciples of John the Baptist in Ephesus, and he wants to tell that story, in turn, because it introduces his next major set piece, which is about Paul’s overall impact in Ephesus and what happened as a result. And it is also true that Luke is not averse to making the point, this way and that, that women played an important role in the life of the early church, so that to have Priscilla helping her husband Aquila to teach a learned scholar from the great university city of Alexandria something he didn’t already know is a pleasing and telling point. But this still hasn’t got us right into the centre of things.

The heart of the matter seems to be something about Christian baptism in the name of Jesus, and about baptism in the holy spirit. It may well be that Apollos does indeed already possess the spirit, though verse 25, sometimes cited to prove this because literally it reads ‘burning in spirit’, can’t be pressed into service to make

that point. But, though he knows a lot about Jesus, and presumably already regards him as the Messiah, he only knows John's baptism. In other words, by whatever (to us) strange chain of circumstances, he has followed the story well into the ministry of Jesus, and perhaps also into his death and resurrection—the story which, we recall, is carefully anchored, even at the start of Acts, with reference to John the Baptist (1:5, 22). But nobody has told him that from the day of Pentecost onwards the church had welcomed people into its full fellowship through baptism in the name of Jesus (or, as it quickly developed, in the name of the Trinity, as in Matthew 28:19). And perhaps—just perhaps—he may after all be in the same situation as the 12 people in the next story, who haven't realized that God has been pouring his spirit upon the followers of Jesus, and that this is open to everyone who believes. Perhaps.<sup>1</sup>

Paul, however, well understands baptism in the name of Jesus, teaching that baptism formed us into one body and we were all given one Spirit to drink (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

### ***One Body, One Spirit***

Steve Martin and Lily Tomlin's 1984 movie, "All of Me," is a funny movie. Lily Tomlin plays Edwina Cutwater, a very rich woman who doesn't want to die. She finds another woman willing to accept her soul, but a mistake during the "operation" sends Edwina's soul directly into the body of Roger Cobb, a passing lawyer. To make matters worse, she takes over only half of Roger's body. Thus, Edwina controls one arm and one leg while Roger controls the other arm and leg. Needless to say, with Edwina and Roger in charge, the poor fellow's arms and legs are not all pulling in the same direction. Steve Martin's gift for physical comedy is on full display as he portrays a man whose limbs have minds of their own.

### ***One body, many members***

I wonder if the apostle Paul would find the movie all that funny, or if it would hit a little too close to home. Today's passage from one of Paul's letters to the believers in Corinth reveals that they were too much like Edwina/Roger, with the various limbs/members<sup>2</sup> pulling in different directions. Paul doesn't see unity in Corinth, much less unity of purpose. Instead, he sees a community divided and consumed by social status. Let me explain.

Most of us quickly grasp several of Paul's points in this passage (you might read 12:4-31 in its entirety).

1. First, we humans are a diverse bunch. Though there is much in our humanness that we share, we all know quite well that there is a wide range of personalities, experiences, and values that threaten to divide even the smallest groups.
2. Second, we know that God has given us a variety of gifts. Whether we call them gifts or talents,<sup>3</sup> we know that some are good at one thing, others at another. I'm pretty good talking in front of groups and during emergencies.. Others are better at caring for people over a long period of time.
3. Third, I think we understand that these various gifts make our community stronger. To use Paul's body metaphor, the eye needs the hand which needs the foot. The body needs them all. Our diversity is a benefit – so long as it is lived out in love and in unity of purpose.

But when Paul begins talking about members that seem to be weaker or seem to be less honorable (v. 23-24), his meaning becomes unclear. In part, this is because Paul is trying to be polite in his use of the body metaphor. But it is also because we live in a different culture than did Paul and the believers.

### ***Weaker? Less honorable?***

When Paul writes about the indispensability of "members that seem weaker" (1 Cor. 12:22) he is alluding to our body's internal organs: the heart, the liver, and the rest. Though we could never use our heart to lift a table or ward off an attacker, it is necessary to our life. I could live without an arm or a leg, without any limbs at all, but I could not live without a heart.

Paul's reference to the "members we think less honorable" is a veiled reference to the sexual organs, which we, like Adam and Eve, hide from others with our clothing. Yet, as Paul writes, who could deny that we honor our sexuality. Paul's point becomes clear when we remember that the Mediterranean cultures were built upon the accumulation of

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, N.T. *Acts for Everyone, Part 2: Chapters 13-28*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2008), 107–108.

<sup>2</sup> Our modern use of the word "member" as in "one who belongs to," is based on this older meaning of a body limb or organ.

<sup>3</sup> A biblically derived word that comes from Jesus' so-called parable of the talents (see Matthew 25:14-30).

honor and the avoidance of shame. Wealth, public patronage, careers, and the rest were all used to a single end, that of accumulating honor, respect, and social status.

Thus, while Paul's words here may be a bit confusing to us, they surely hit the Corinthians hard. Not only does Paul want them to appreciate the contributions and value of those who seem weaker or less honorable or even inferior, he wants those persons, the ones of lowest social status, to be lifted up to the top of the heap. These are words that could have come out of Jesus' mouth; they are consistent with the Sermon of the Mount. Those on the "bottom" sit atop the pyramid in the kingdom of God and in the body of Christ.

No work in the body of Christ is less honorable or less important than any other work. It may seem that way to us, but that is only because we don't see clearly and we haven't learned to embrace Jesus' call to self-giving love. There are ushers and there are pastors. Different work, but one Spirit, one body, one God-given purpose.

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Paul's letter called*

*Ephesians 4:4-6 (NIV)*