

Lured from the Water, the Little Fish Perish

NORMAN NAGEL



WHICH BIRTHDAY ARE WE CELEBRATING? How many birthdays has *LOGIA* had? Of water or of the Spirit? There is evidence of the Spirit. Is that then “born again”? How many years to “the age of discretion”? With that might come the recognition that a Christian surely knows his birth from his baptism. There is no mention of water in volume 1 of 1989, sometimes called *Urlogia*. If we were to do it over again, would we not begin with the water and Name of holy baptism? While not undertaking to do others’ repentances, something might yet be attempted to relieve this waterlessness. The *Large Catechism* says we can never finish extolling what it calls “a water of God” [*ein Gotteswasser*] (LC IV,14), but we might nevertheless perhaps attempt a belated, aetiological, beginning.

Our banner is supplied by Tertullian. No one has ever had a more rollicking time with the water than Tertullian. “The sacramentum of our water by which the sins of our former blindness are washed away, and we are liberated into life eternal.”¹ Thus Tertullian begins the first treatise we have on holy baptism at the end of the second century. There is never a hint that there was ever a time after Christ without holy baptism, for every Christian knew and confessed that he gave it to the apostolic ministry to do: gift, mandate, institution of the Lord. He was himself baptized in John’s baptism for sinners only, with the name of Servant-Son put on him with the water. When our Lord had done all that was given him to do with his baptismal name, he gave the Eleven a baptism to do in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Name and water running together. Water and Spirit running together. “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). It is the Spirit’s work to deliver the Jesus for us to us. “He will take of mine and give it to you” (John 16:15). The Spirit does this with his words delivered by the apostolic ministry (John 6:63; 17:20). He delivers the Jesus for us to us with the water; his death and resurrection are then ours (Rom 6:3–11). What we have put to block God off is washed away. With the water the forgiveness of sins. “A washing of regeneration and renewal done by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:4).

What all is given and done with the water is given and done with the water. None of what our Lord has running with it may

be subtracted, split off, separated, divided up, or spiritualistically lower-leveled. “What God has joined together let not man put asunder” (Matt 19:6). Or Dr. Luther: “*Lasse das Sakrament gantz bleiben*” [Let the sacrament remain whole].² Faith rejoices in the gifts given in the way our Lord gives them and does not take in hand to decide what we can do without, or devise better ways than he has given for his giving out such gifts with this water. Faith clings to the water conjoined with the Name (LC IV, 29).

There is already a Gnostic smell in what some Corinthians called spiritual things. What they heard of the apostolic message they fit into what was then the going psychology with its three levels of flesh, mind, and spirit. Water was bottom level. The apostles let them have it in bucketfuls. Most vivid is the way of watering animals. If you have ever attempted to do this with a calf or a foal you know how much water gets splashed about, although some does go down the throat. Getting watered is getting Spirit-ed (1 Cor 12:13).³

Where the water, there the Spirit. As in John they go together, and thus they do the rebirth. “Born of water and the Spirit” (John 3:5). Water is mentioned first so we need have no doubt where the Spirit is doing his life-bestowing work and not just blowing about hither or thither. What is here indissolubly together has had heresy working at it to separate them all along the way (LC IV, 7).

The Gnostic attack scorned the water. Of Mani we know that he had little joy of the water. What baptism there was for him was metaphorical and figurative and so a fractioned process of progressive purification through *gnosis*.⁴ The Gnostics would rise transcendent to what they supposed was a more God-level spirituality, above and away from the lowly earthly, physical, carnal, specific water. The Gnostic priestess, against

1. Ernest Evans, ed., *Tertullian’s Homily on Baptism* (London: SPCK, 1964), 4 (hereafter *Bapt.*). WA 12: 48.19; BSLK, 536, n. 7; WA 49: 127.17: *eitel wolgefallen, lust* 964). A.-G. Hamann, *Baptism: Ancient Liturgies and Patristic Texts* (Staten Island: Alba House, 1967), 30.
2. WA 30, 1: 55.19; WA 23: 266.26; AE 37: 140.
3. Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Baptism in the Thought of St. Paul* (New York: Herder, 1964), 84–85.
4. L. Koenen, “From Baptism to the Gnosis of Manichaeism,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: Brill, 1980–1981), 2:736–52; Schnackenburg, *Baptism*, 144.

NORMAN E. NAGEL, a contributing editor for *LOGIA*, is Professor Emeritus at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. This article first appeared in the Epiphany 2003 issue of *LOGIA* (vol. 12, no. 1).

whom Tertullian writes, is of the Cainite sect. She was not given to teach, even if done correctly. She knew how to kill the little fish by luring them out of the water. Separated from the water the little fish perish, separated from the Christed water. “We are born in water as little fish in the way of our fish Jesus Christ” [*Nos pisciculi secundum ichthus nostrum Jesum Christum in aqua nascimur*].⁵ Such as that Gnostic priestess carries on where there is no water. There dwell vipers, basilisks, and cockatrices. Watch out for vipers, asps, basilisks, and cockatrices. If you come upon one of them, you are in peril. No water where they are, and where there is no water, the little fish perish. Apart from the water where Christ is, waterless death. “*Nunquam sine aqua Christus*” [Christ is never without water].⁶

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A more subtle attempt to diminish this water comes of embarrassment at its utterly unspectacular lowliness: someone is dipped in water with a few words. That should get him to eternity! For Tertullian there is no telling God how he may or may not do what he does. Lowly simplicity is characteristic of God’s way of doing things. “A carnal act with spiritual effect.” For Tertullian this is no spiritualizing from lower to higher, or outer to inner. “In the waters our spirit is corporally washed, and in those waters our flesh is spiritually cleansed.” Thus “baptism itself.”⁷ Try a bit of Neo-Platonism on that, if you can.

At ground level Tertullian goes darting about collecting all the water that the Lord may ever have made use of, inquiring, he says, after the *auctoritas* of the liquid element. (Exousia, what the water is granted, permitted, enabled to do—its worth. The translation’s authority, *potestas*, power, run less well in the way of a gift.) What he gathers together is not to praise the water, but to confess baptism (*rationes baptismi*), and this not by analogy, but simply by what God has set up and does (*in sacramentis propriis parere fecit*).⁸ The water is always his servant as

his words tell us. Starting off at the creation waters Tertullian then has a whale of a time finding any water in Scripture that can then be used to extol what the water of holy baptism does and gives. Thus: Israel through the waters of the Red Sea. The waters of Marah made to sweet usefulness by the tree Moses threw in: and that tree was Christ. The water from the rock and that rock was Christ.

See how great is the grace that water has in the presence of God and his Christ for the corroboration of baptism. Wherever Christ is, there is water: he himself is baptized in water; when called to a marriage he inaugurates with water the first rudiments of his power; when engaged in conversation he invites those who are athirst to come to his everlasting water; when teaching of charity he approves of a cup of water offered to a little one as one of the works of affection; at a well-side he recruits his strength; he walks upon the water; by his own choice he crosses over the water; with water he makes himself a servant to his disciples. He continues his witness to baptism right on to his passion: when he is given up to the cross, water is in evidence, as Pilate’s hands are aware: when he receives a wound, water bursts forth from his side, as the soldier’s spear can tell.⁹

In his edition of Tertullian’s *De Baptismo*, Evans points out Tertullian’s distinction between “baptism itself” and those things based on “church tradition and custom, and not on scriptural warrant.” These Evans observes in Tertullian as “(in their origin) illustrative tokens,” and not themselves doing or bestowing what they point to and extol.¹⁰

We may later observe some extolling getting so carried away that it ends up by itself extolling itself. But first we may observe the pull of an inherent affinity, magnetism, or perhaps valency. (St. Augustine might call it *virtus*; Goethe, *die Wahlverwandtschaften*.) It works as one pulling others into the dance. First our Lord weds his words and the water, and the dance is on. No matter how crowded the dance, this first pair is always there, and without them it dies away—dries away. We attend the liturgy.

Most weighty in Tertullian is what he evidences of the liturgy. Nothing is ever called a baptism that is not done with water. The water by itself does not engage attention. In the Didache (*ca.* 100) after confession of what has been taught, baptism is done in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Running water is preferable, but if not available, then other water, cold water, and if not cold, then warm, and if neither, then pour water three times upon the head in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The Name certainly and with water, but the how of the water is no great

5. Tertullian, Bapt. 1, 3 (Evans, Homily, 4; Hamann, Baptism, 30).

6. Tertullian, Bapt. 9, 4 (Evans, Homily, 20, 15).

7. Tertullian, Bapt. 2, 1; 7, 2 (Evans, Homily, 4, 16; Hamann, Baptism, 31, 36. Ipse baptismus; cf. *Little Book of Baptism*, 5. BSLK, 536.25 and 538, n. 7; WA 12: 48.17; Kolb-Wengert, 372.

8. Tertullian, Bapt. 3, 1 and 6 (Evans, Homily, 6 and 8).

9. Tertullian, Bapt. 9, 3–4 (Evans, Homily, 20).

10. Evans, Homily, xxix; “Holy Baptism” in *Lutheran Worship: History and Practice*, ed. Fred L. Precht (St. Louis: CPH, 1993), 267 (hereafter LWHP).

matter.¹¹ Justin Martyr speaks of washing “in the water in the Name of the Father and Lord God of all things, and of our Savior Jesus Christ, and of the Holy Spirit.”¹² We observe how the Name bursts with all that is in it, and when Justin tells us that this washing is called enlightenment, we see how one word, item, gift, pulls another in along with it, and we are on our way swinging into the roundelay of the exulting Eastern baptismal liturgies. They all join hands as they circle round the font and each gets gloriously wet. Any one of them that dries out drops out of the dance, dead or dying: no water, no life.

How can you be saved as wet, and then be saved as dry?

Some are wet already in the New Testament. Thus undoubtedly *bath* (loutron) (Titus 3:5), a washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit that joins hands with newness of life (Rom 6:4) and the washing of water with the word (Eph 5:25) thus Christ’s bride; by way of a washing a woman came to be a bride (Ezek 16:9), as also a man a priest (Exod 29; Lev 8).

And as Christ the giver of it is called by many various names, so too is this gift, whether it is from the exceeding gladness of its nature (as those who are very fond of a thing take pleasure in using its name), or that the great variety of its benefits has reacted for us upon its names. We call it the gift, the grace, baptism, unction, illumination, the clothing of immortality, the laver of regeneration, the seal, and everything that is honorable [timios]. We call it the gift, because it is given to us in return for nothing on our part; grace, because it is conferred even on debtors; baptism, because sin is buried with it in water; unction as priestly and royal; for such were they who were anointed; illumination, because of its splendor; clothing, because it hides our shame; the laver, because it washes us; the seal because it preserves us, and is moreover the indication of dominion [who is now my Lord]. In it the heavens rejoice; it is glorified by angels, because of its kindred splendor. It is the image of the heavenly bliss. We long indeed to sing out its praises, but as befits it we are not able.¹³

Is there any stopping this “exceeding gladness?” Luther’s *Freude* and *Herrlichkeit*.¹⁴ Who is to be told you are not welcome into this dance? Mayn’t we bring our friends? Have you run out of water? Who can hold a lid down on what is bursting to be extolled? Such vitality of extolling may however swing so free as to end up by itself with what is extolled in itself rather than confessing “baptism itself,” the water and the Name.

Worst of all is flying off the ground up and away, away from the water. There is some defense against wafting off transcendent in Tertullian’s Stoic style of thought and language in a monolevel world, and also in Rome’s spare, lean, straight, solid, no-nonsense liturgical language. For liturgical larking about we go East or beyond the Alps.

In Spain the *Liber Ordinum* gives us:

Behold, O Lord, we also, humbly observing the commandment of thy majesty, have prepared a way through which we lead thy people who like as the hart [Ps. 42:1] thirst for the fountains of waters. Do thou, O Lord, forgive their iniquity, cover their sins, and lead them as thou hast sworn into the land of promise, that flows with milk and honey. Thou art the Lamb of God that takest away the sins of the world [John 1:29]: thou, who hast granted that they who know thee should become the sons of God [John 1:12]: thou who art anointed by the Father with the oil of gladness above thy fellows [Ps. 45:7]. O Lord, pour upon these people the blessing of thy grace. Lest they die in their old sins, let them be cleansed in the blessing of the fount of waters: let them be reborn in the Holy Spirit, and let them see the everlasting altar of Jerusalem: and may the power of the highest overshadow them [Luke 1:35]. Blessed be their generation and blessed be the fruit of the womb [Luke 1:42] of their mother the Church: for the Lord shall magnify his servants in good things, and of his kingdom there shall be no end [Luke 1:73].¹⁵

That may also be said of these prayers. And from Wittenberg the *Sintflutgebet*:

Almighty, eternal God, in your strict judgment you damned the unbelieving world with the flood. By your great mercy you preserved faithful Noah and seven with him. You drowned hardened Pharaoh and all his men in the Red Sea. Through it you led your people Israel with dry feet. In this way you signaled ahead with this bath your holy baptism. By the baptism of your dear child, our Lord Jesus Christ, you hallowed and set forth the Jordan and water everywhere to be a blessed flood and boundless washing away of our sins. For the sake of that unfathomable mercy of yours, we implore that you would graciously

11. Didache 7, 1–3; E. C. Whitaker, ed., *Documents of the Baptismal Liturgy* (London: SPCK, 1987), 1; Cyril C. Richardson, ed., *Early Christian Fathers, Library of Christian Classics 1* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 174.
 12. Ap I, 61; Whitaker, *Documents*, 2; Richardson, *Fathers*, 282.
 13. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orations* 40.4 (PG 36:361; NPNF² 7:360). Hamann, *Baptism*, 89–90.

14. WA 12: 48, 19; BSLK, 536, n. 7; WA 49: 127, 17: *eitel wolgefallen, lust und Freude*. AE 51: 319.
 15. Whitaker, *Documents*, 118.

look upon this N. and grant salvation with true faith by the Holy Spirit. Thus through this saving flood drown and put an end to all this as born in him from Adam, and all that he himself has added to that. Separate him from the number of the unbelievers, and preserve him dry and safe in the ark of your holy church. Keep him always fervent in spirit, joyful in hope, serving your Name, so that with all the believers he may come to eternal life according to your promise, made worthy through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.¹⁶

This prayer, filled to bursting, finds no place in *Lutheran Worship*, which is of mostly Saxon descent, with the Flood Prayer until 1982. In the *Lutheran Book of Worship* only some parts of it survive, and they not the weightiest. One can hardly imagine a baptismal prayer heavier with water than the Flood Prayer. It has not been found prior to the *Little Book of Baptism* of 1523, and yet no part of it is original with Luther. Parts of it are found in Aquinas, Damascenus, Cyril of Jerusalem, Origen, and Justin Martyr. First water scim à la Tertullian gives us 1 Peter 3:18–22; 2 Peter 2:5; 1 Corinthians 10:1–2; the Jewish lectionary for the New Year (Great Sabbath), Exodus 14; Genesis 7. When is too much too much? A question contrary to the way of the gospel (“He forgives us more sins than we got”), contrary to his way with the water.

*When the watery liturgy of the
baptized is over, it is not over,
for there flow the waters of life.*

The history of the Flood Prayer’s use may give a reading on holy baptism in the Lutheran tradition, and so perhaps also in the Anglican tradition, where a version of it appears in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer, and was in the American Prayer Book until 1928. In 1549 “saving flood” becomes “misticall washing”; the strict judgment according to which the unbelieving world was damned becomes “of thy iustice dydest destroy by fluddes of water the whole world for synne.” In 1552 this is all gone and we have first “of thy great merce diddest save Noe and his family.” Pharaoh and his army have also disappeared. Already in 1549 Adam didn’t make the cut with all that is from him. 1549

has “the holesome laver of regeneration,” but thereafter it disappears.¹⁷ No Adam or Pharaoh either in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*; unbelief and faith have also disappeared.

There is so much in the Flood Prayer. Some of it is devastatingly hard to take; no wonder it has been clipped about. There is so much water that a congregation fed mostly on what Chemnitz calls “pleasantries” would almost certainly blow bubbles. How can you be saved as wet, and then be saved as dry? A little fish dried out perishes. Water scorned damns. Inhaled water kills. Water with the Name gives life.

Augustine may help in telling of a shipwreck (*naufragium*) and two waters. The ship is breaking up. In a few minutes the sea water will drown them all. In this emergency a Christian does what he would otherwise not do. He baptizes a catechumen. The baptized catechumen absolves the Christian who has baptized him. Then they drown together to life eternal. Awesome water.¹⁸

The South Germans did not want to have the Flood Prayer, they would do without exorcism, and when the Enlightenment came it was embarrassed by such heavy talk of sin. What has that to do with water?

Enlightenment recalls the blindness of my days in Papua New Guinea. There the pastor at Arawa on Bougainville told me of the training he had received from Bishop Mufuanu. This bishop, old and wise (in Papua New Guinea that was an hendiadys), took the fresh, green, young missionary from Australia with him as he went on visitations. So they trekked up and down the steep mountainsides crossing the voluble rivers in between. One day they noticed that one of the party was not with them. They looked back, and saw him bent over the water at the bottom of the valley chattering away. The young Australian was much puzzled; Bishop Mufuanu explained: “He is listening to the water and talking to it.” Then with their form of the first person plural, which includes and embraces you, he said to the young Australian, “He has not been to school, as we have.”

When I told this to the pioneer missionary Willard Burce, Apostle to the Enga, he summed it up with: “You see, they have not been through the Enlightenment.” Is there any hope for us who have been? Perhaps the recognition of no hope may be the beginning of hope even for us—us post-Enlightenment, post-Existentialism, post-neo-Hegeleanism, postpersonalism, poststructuralism, postdeconstructionism, postsemiotics, postnarratology, post what comes next? Each methodology has its own particular usefulness, and also its limitations as evidenced in its presuppositions. With some help from each

16. BSLK, 539; WA 12: 43–44; Cl 3; 313; AE 53: 97; Kolb-Wengert, 373–74. Leiturgia 5:380–3; Alfred Adam, “Das Sintflutgebet in der Taufliturgie,” *Wort und Dienst* 3 (1952): 11–22; W. Dürig, “Das Sintflutgebet in Luthers Taufbüchlein,” in *Wahrheit und Verkündigung*, ed. Leo Scheffczyk, Werner Dettloff, and Richard Heinzmann (München: Schöningh, 1967), 2:1035–47; *Lutheran Book of Worship*, 122; LWHP, 274–275.

17. E. C. S. Gibson, ed., *The First and Second Prayer Books of Edward VI* (London: Dent, 1964), 236, 394; Edward Lambe Parsons and Bayard Hale Jones, *The American Prayer Book* (New York: Scribner, 1955), 235.

18. Augustine in a letter to Fortunatus quoted in Gratian’s *Decretum III*, distinction 4, chapter 36; quoted in Tr 67 (BSLK, 491, n. 2; Triglotta, 522; Tappert, 331). Tappert’s index (651) makes a general rule out of this emergency, as does also Kolb-Wengert’s index (695), contrary to Tr 67, in *casu necessitatis*, which is the point of the story. Thus Triglotta, 1246, Jacob’s Book of Concord, and Müller, 881.

we are in bondage to none, not even the very latest. Of each we may ask whether wet or dry? We should have learned something; we should have unlearned something. One thing may perhaps help us along, and that is the recognition of all the different sorts of language that attempt to control by theory and categorization, on from St. Augustine's *signum* to yesterday's semiotics. The Lord's words and Name alone hold sure. We hear him say it by his use of the mouth he has put there for his use in saying it. We witness what happens. We see a man's hand doing the water. Done in God's name it is "truly God's own act" (LC IV, 10). The Lord's water with the Lord's Name. Whom he waters his Name on is his, no more wreckable than his Name, than he. *Alles was Gottes ist* (LC IV, 17).

If Tertullian has drawn us into rejoicing in the creaturely carnality of the water, we may then not rebel against our creaturely locatedness in time and place but rather rejoice in it, for that is where the water is, bestowing what flows from his crucified side. Angels and saints gone ahead are already into the unending liturgies. The water does not run uphill, but carries us on and out into our calling where baptism wets and enlivens everything. "More in baptism to live and exercise than we can get through our whole life doing," says LC IV, 41. The water that goes on thus flowing unfailingly starts from where our Lord put it: means of grace, *coram Deo*, liturgy, font, that is, water and Name poured on. On the one hand the bare minimum of holy baptism in cases of emergency, that is, when death is imminent, and on the other the liturgy that can't stop growing with always more and more to extol, and so it gets to be as if we are in heaven already, and no longer such creatures as made brothers here by Jesus. From time to time some pruning then, but then only some things that have dried out, or are pretending to work apart from the water.

Sit or kneel beside the fonted water and listen to what it is saying: first the words that our Lord has given it to say, and then all the words that these first words will pull along with them, and then the words that these words will pull from the cloud, the rained-on crowd of witnesses, and from what echoes out of the emptiness of our lives and the brimming fullness, and so to a quietness in which the water goes on blessing us as may flow then into the liturgy where our Lord has always more gifts to give out than we could ever have imagined. He never runs dry; our little pint-size receptacles can never hold it all. Unfaith says a pint's enough, thank you. A pint is all I can manage, but that much I can manage. Our laying on limits and our lust to have the management, to get our hands on the tap, are in pitiful con-

tradition of our Lord's watery way of dealing with us; floods of it and always more.

Deum vidit, et erubuit. The water beheld her Lord, and blushed.¹⁹

And when the watery liturgy of the baptized is over, it is not over, for there flow the waters of life, the Lord's river and fountain of the water of life flowing, enlivening us through all our days to his consummation. Now it is day by day. "In the morning when you get up, make the sign of the holy cross and say, In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." "The Old Adam in us be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and a new man daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever." And so on to the New Jerusalem with its river of the water of life. "On either side of the river the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month [always something more to look forward to]; and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. . . . They shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads" (Rev 22:2, 4).

Prepare yourself Zebulon,
and adorn yourself Naphthali.
Jordan, pause in your flowing
to dance in receiving
the Lord. He comes and would be baptized.
Rejoice O Adam,
with the mother of us all.
Do not hide yourselves
as once you did in paradise.
He who saw you then naked has appeared to clothe you
with the garment of the beginning.
Christ appeared
to make new the whole of creation.²⁰

Rejoice, O LOGIA. Your sins too are washed away. Clothed in Christ you go on wetly garmented all the way. *Vivat, crescat floreat Logia abluta.* **LOGIA**

19. L. C. Martin, ed., *The Poems, English, Latin and Greek, of Richard Crashaw*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 38.

20. Troparion, Orthros January 2. From 5–6 century. Anthologion tou holou eniautou I, 1340; Menaion, 21. Rome, 1967. Lothar Heiser, *Die Taufe in der orthodoxen Kirche* (Trier: Paulinus, 1987), 216–17.

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