

One Baptism (Yes, Just One!)

EPHESIANS 4:1-6

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“One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5)

I am not sure how many times someone has said to me, “I’m a baptized Lutheran,” or “I’m a baptized Catholic,” or “I’m a baptized Presbyterian” or some sentence very similar. Yet every time I hear this I want to yell... “No, no, no!! You ARE NOT a baptized Lutheran, Catholic or Presbyterian. You ARE a baptized Christian!” I will grant that a person may have been baptized in a Lutheran church, or using a Roman Catholic liturgy, or been raised within the Presbyterian tradition. But there is just one Baptism. True, the age of the candidates may vary, the type of church may vary, the liturgy may vary, even the amount of water may vary, but there is just one Baptism and that is baptism into Christ!

The early Church used a variety of models and images for Baptism. The Scriptures give witness to this variety as it speaks of Baptism as... being joined to Christ’s death and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5 & Colossians 2:12),...a salvation experience (I Peter 3:21),...a re-clothing in Christ (Galatians 3:27),...a liberation into a new humanity (Galatians 3:28),...a forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38), and an entrance into one body by one spirit (I Corinthians 12:13). Even though the models and images vary greatly, each gives witness to a different facet of just one reality – one Baptism. As Ephesians puts it, “There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism.” (Ephesians 4:4-5) That’s right, one Baptism, yes, just one.

As a Community Church we seek to give an inclusive and ecumenical witness to the one Baptism. As a congregation we have chosen to make our baptismal practices as varied as the whole Christian family which is called Church. We allow individuals and families according to their faith and tradition to determine the appropriate age for Baptism – for some of us believe that children may and should be baptized, while others of us believe that only persons who can personally profess faith should be baptized. We baptize people in both categories, yet there is just one Baptism. We allow individuals and families to choose the mode of baptism – for some of us believe that Baptism must be by immersion in water, while others of us believe that pouring water over a person’s head is also appropriate. In this Community Church we baptize persons both ways, yet there is just one Baptism!

In 1996 I was appointed to chair a committee whose mission was to develop the opening worship celebration for the Michigan Ecumenical Forum’s annual assembly. The assembly theme was “One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism” and the worship service was to be a service of baptismal renewal in celebration of our common Baptism. The challenge of this endeavor is that the Michigan Ecumenical Forum (MEF) is an organization composed of 29 denominations/communions and 15 ecumenical organizations from around the state. Not only were the usual ecumenical churches

involved in the MEF – Presbyterian, Methodist, United, Disciples, Episcopal, Lutheran – but also churches such as Brethren, Moravian, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Christian Science, Reorganized Latter Day Saints, and Russian Orthodox. With that type of diversity, how could this committee be inclusive to all? We decided to not gloss over our diversity but to take it seriously. We went back to ideas learned in Theology 101 that Christians tend to have three different views on Baptism. Some see Baptism as a sacrament which means it is a visible sign that conveys God’s invisible grace. Others accept Baptism as an ordinance meaning that it is a human response of discipleship. Lastly, some view Baptism as spiritual so that water is not used, but it is the Holy Spirit’s activity in a person that is important. Then we invited three speakers, one to represent each view – an Episcopal bishop to give the sacramental view, a district minister of the Church of Brethren to give the ordinance view, and a captain from the Salvation Army to give the spiritual view. Surprisingly, the highly sacramental person that I am, found great areas of agreement with the two that didn’t represent my belief. Just one more testimony to me that there is just one Baptism. Finally, as that service concluded we invited everyone to come forward to a large bowl of water and form one body, yet told the people to let their beliefs on Baptism dictate their actions. Some people dipped their fingers in the water and made the sign of the cross, some splashed water on their faces, some touched the bowl but not the water, while some ignored the water and greeted their sisters and brothers in Christ. This mass of humanity was a beautiful sign of how our one Baptism, even understood differently, makes us one body in Christ.

These same diverse views on Baptism are present in our Community Church movement every day. Yet it is just one Baptism that unites us. In January, 2002, our International Council of Community Churches will join eight other church bodies in a new relationship known as Churches Uniting in Christ (CUIC). One of the marks of this new relationship is that all the churches in CUIC will recognize the members of the other churches in one Baptism. Truly we will share one Baptism into one body by one Spirit, as together we declare to the whole world that there is one Lord, one faith, and one God of all.

As a Community Church we not only preach about “one Baptism”, but we try to practice what we preach. That is why every year we join with other churches in an ecumenical celebration of Baptism. Every Easter our congregation joins with sisters and brothers in Christ from Westminster Presbyterian, Messiah Lutheran, and First Congregational United Church of Christ to celebrate the sacraments of Baptism and Holy communion. If you have never attended this service, this is what you have missed. Each year one of the four pastors is selected as a presider and leads the baptismal portion of the service, including questioning the candidates. Then the pastor of each church baptizes the candidates from his/her own church. Finally the pastors as a group lay hands upon each of the newly baptized. The ancient sign of bestowing the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:17) is also a confirmation that the baptism of one church is truly the baptism of all churches. Both Sara and Hanna (my children) were baptized at Easter in this very ecumenical and unique way. Sara was baptized by the Presbyterian pastor at the Lutheran church by having water poured over her head. Hanna was baptized by the United Church of Christ pastor, here in our Community church by being immersed in the water. Both children following their baptism had hands laid on them by the Presbyterian, Lutheran, and UCC Pastors, as well as myself. With such ecumenical baptisms I’ve almost guaranteed that

the only statement my children can ever make is “I’m a baptized Christian!” Truly, every Easter we witness to the fact, there is just one Baptism.

As a Community Church we are a diverse people committed to unity in Christ. In our diversity we may baptize different people, in different ways, with different views, but all are baptized: in one Lord, by one Spirit, into one body, through one faith, by one Baptism, yes, just one!