

Baptism is the New (Old) Penance

By **Mike Glodo**

For my Lenten-friendly Protestant friends, I sympathize. You might have been raised in a tradition which regularly observed the liturgical calendar and find it perfectly normal. On the other hand you may be from an anti-liturgical tradition suspicious even of saying the Lord's Prayer in unison. (Hint: If you get one pew to lag behind a couple of words, it's 100% Roman free. If you don't have pews then you don't care anyway. Go back to your Chris Tomlin playlist on Spotify.) But many folks I know have softened from their anti-liturgical pasts and are open to observing liturgical seasons.

Whatever your trajectory, you may feel that Lent has something to offer but, ironically, feel a little guilty about going the whole way in giving up something. By the way, did you hear the story about the man fasting on beer and water for Lent?¹ There's no punch line.

This reminds me of Garrison Keillor's story about Lake Wobegon Lutheran Pastor David Inqvist who gave up Scotch for Lent. But when he paid a collegial call on Catholic Priest Father Wilmer, he was offered single malt Scotch. Pastor Inqvist was faced with an unexpected and complex theological calculation. To keep his Lenten vow would have spiritual benefit. But so also would the enhanced fellowship with his fellow clergyman. As a trained theological professional he was able to make that calculation quickly and accurately and, hence, enjoy the Scotch.

But if we are tempted by the penitential season, we do well to remember Calvin's conclusion as to why penitence does not constitute a sacrament of the church. In the process he refers to the saying "...if any one had, by sin, injured the garment of innocence received in baptism, he might repair it by penitence."

Instead, he exhorts us to look to the sacrament authorized by Christ, viz. to baptism.

Let it be whose it may...it cannot be excused if understood in this sense; as if baptism were effaced by sin, and were not rather to be recalled to the mind of the sinner whenever he thinks of the forgiveness of sins, that he may thereby recollect himself, regain courage, and be confirmed in the belief that he shall

¹ "This Guy Gave Up Food for Lent and Is Surviving On Beer Instead." TIME, 3/24/2014. <http://time.com/35534/man-gives-up-food-for-lent/>. Accessed 3/25/2014. A similar story seems to be reported around this time every year for the past few years.

obtain the forgiveness of sins which was promised him in baptism. ...[Whoever would say] that baptism, which is fallen from by those who deserve to be excommunicated from the Church, is repaired by penitence, these worthy expositors wrest to their own impiety. You will speak most correctly, therefore, if you call baptism the sacrament of penitence, seeing it is given to those who aim at repentance to confirm their faith and seal their confidence. But lest you should think this our invention, it appears, that besides being conformable to the words of Scripture, it was generally regarded in the early Church as an indubitable axiom. For in the short Treatise on Faith addressed to Peter, and bearing the name of Augustine, it is called, "The sacrament of faith and repentance." But why have recourse to doubtful writings, as if anything can be required more distinct than the statement of the Evangelist, that John preached "the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins"? (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3).²

Calvin is saying that we are to look nowhere else for forgiveness of sins than what was promised to us in baptism. Not that baptism equates with forgiveness, but to the one who looks back upon it in faith he is more and more assured of the forgiveness and other benefits which come to us by grace through faith. This is known as "improving our baptism" as formulated in Westminster Larger Catechism 167:

167. How is our Baptism to be improved by us?

The needful but much neglected duty of improving our Baptism, is to be performed by us all our life long, especially in the time of temptation, and when we are present at the administration of it to others; by serious and thankful consideration of the nature of it, and of the ends for which Christ instituted it, the privileges and benefits conferred and sealed thereby, and our solemn vow made therein; by being humbled for our sinful defilement, our falling short of, and walking contrary to, the grace of baptism, and our engagements; by growing up to assurance of pardon of sin, and of all other blessings sealed to us in that sacrament; by drawing strength from the death and resurrection of Christ, into whom we are baptized, for the mortifying of sin, and quickening of grace; and by endeavoring to live by faith, to have our conversation in holiness and righteousness, as those that have therein given up their names to Christ; and to walk in brotherly love, as being baptized by the same Spirit into one body.

In other words, we already have been offered in baptism what is illegitimately offered us in the novelty of the sacrament of penitence. Instead of looking around for new assurances, let's look back to the sign that Jesus gave his church. This will keep our focus on what he has done rather than on what we must try to do in vain.

² John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion (1559), Book IV, Chapter 19, paragraph 17.

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For more on the notion of “improving one’s baptism,” see “One Baptism: NIB” at <https://refmin.wordpress.com/2007/10/04/one-baptism-nib/>.

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