

BAPTISM and the ecumenical project in Ireland

Seeing Baptism from the Outside - A response to the address by Bishop Richard Clark by Prof. Drew Gibson (Union Theological College, Belfast)

I would like to thank Bishop Clark for his address and offer a response that picks up seven phrases from his address but a response that contains just one single idea. Instead of thinking about baptism from the inside, let's reflect on how baptism is seen from the point of view of those outside the church. In other words, let's consider baptism from a missional perspective. To put that idea in context, Bishop Clark talks of *baptism as defined by the different Christian traditions*. As a Presbyterian from the Evangelical stream of that church this forces me to face a problem. Here is how baptism is defined by one of the key documents of the Reformed tradition, the Westminster Confession of Faith.

Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, ordained by Jesus Christ, not only for the solemn admission of the party baptized into the visible Church; but also to be unto him a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his ingrafting into Christ, of regeneration, of remission of sins, and of his giving up unto God, through Jesus Christ, to walk in the newness of life. Which sacrament is, by Christ's own appointment, to be continued in His Church until the end of the world. (WCF 28.1)

In the Irish context, this definition sets the Reformed tradition somewhat at odds with itself. Historically we have been strongly influenced by antiCatholicism and by revivalism. This means that the above definition, which comes frighteningly close to baptismal regeneration is very uncomfortable for many. Wanting to hold on to the Westminster confession of Faith, evangelical Presbyterians find themselves forced to affirm statements that have an iconic place in our tradition even when they look awfully like what many want to reject. Putting it bluntly, in practice we do not have a coherent definition of baptism. This, in turn, gives us real problems with Bishop Clark's laudable aspiration: *May one think the unthinkable, and suggest that modes of preparation for baptism are something we might work on together?*

It's a great idea but if the Evangelical wing of the Reformed churches hasn't its baptismal theology sorted out it is unlikely that any joint preparation can be considered. But, let's think another unthinkable, maybe agreement on the theology of baptism isn't actually of primary importance; let's think for a minute about baptism as a public witness to the Gospel, a witness that the community can see and to which it might respond. Why don't we be really radical and just park for a while our different baptismal theologies and practices that reflect different understandings of the relationship between the church and the surrounding community. Let's think missionally, how does our baptismal practice look to the community outside the church?

Bishop Clark's statement concerning the great historic baptistries was strongly missional. *All of them impressive large buildings reminding us of just how central baptism was to the life of the western Christian Church in the early centuries*. Just as the baptistries were big public statements, so baptism itself also should be conceived missionally. It is a public statement of faith, the faith of the Church and the faith of particular individuals within the church. We must make sure that our baptismal practice is actually saying what we want to say to the watching world. I fear that what we are saying by our practice is not what the world outside is actually hearing. Did those great baptistries speak of the glory of God or of the suffering servant

or of the life giving Holy Spirit or did they speak of the generosity of a human benefactor or the pride of a human political or ecclesiastical ruler? How did the community see them? What does our baptismal practice say to the watching world?

Bishop Clark says: Perhaps even ecclesiology and missiology should only be done in the context of the meaning of baptism for all the baptised?

I believe that mission is a good context for looking at anything so I might reorder the words here to say, 'Perhaps even ecclesiology and the meaning of baptism for all the baptised should only be done in the context of mission.' (I know the grammar's a bit off but you know what I mean. If baptism is a public statement of faith then how it is perceived by the watching world is at least as important as how it is perceived ecclesologically and ecumenically. We can make the same shift in centre of gravity, perhaps more subtly, in the following sentence to bring the missional component to the centre.

... it is within a context of shared service to the world that we can each discover and appropriate fellowship / koinonia and the full significance of our baptism.

I believe it is beyond doubt that fellowship and ecumenism only really flourish in the context of a church that is actively committed to the *Missio Dei*, and conceiving baptism as a public statement of faith has much more 'koinonial' and ecumenical potential than seeing it as an intraecclesial affair. The full significance of our baptism is realised in mission as we join with God himself in going to his world with prophetic and gracious love. If Christians are moving in the same missional direction as the Holy Spirit himself, then there is almost an inevitability about growth in fellowship.

What does the watching world think as it looks in at our endless deliberations over intraecclesial affairs? What would the world think if it saw a set of communities which differ on many things but are committed to bringing to the world the Gospel of which baptism speaks. Which is more attractive... and more authentic?

Two more of Bishop Clark's ideas are strongly missional. The first is:

All other vocations, whether to the ordained ministry, to marriage, to religious life, or anything else, should have their origins and meaning in the primary call of Jesus Christ which is rooted in baptism.

While I would not be at ease with some of the theology implicit in this sentence, Baptism is indeed the marker of God's primary call to all human beings. God calls all people, everywhere to himself. In this sense it is inclusive, in the way that calling to marriage or ordination are not. It speaks of the reaching out of God to all ages, races, classes, ethnic groups etc, etc. Under this primary call all other vocations take their secondary place. See the missional thrust?

But, as Bishop Clark points out, baptism also speaks of a Gospel that is exclusive.

Baptism is not only about unity in Christ. It contains in all our traditions an emphasis on repentance and on newness of life through and in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Baptism's nature as public declaration speaks clearly of the offer of new life that God holds out in Christ Jesus. It speaks of dying to sin and rising to new life and of the 'washing of regeneration'. It is an invitation to those who have not experienced these to come and join us who have experienced them, therefore our baptismal practice ought also to be a joyful invitation to come, not to come to any single ecclesially defined community but to come to the One in whom alone new life is to be found. Does the watching world see in our baptismal practice a mumbo jumbo of meaningless words or does it see a social event, an excuse for a party or maybe it sees a well fenced Masonic ritual to which only the inner circle are invited?

In conclusion, like it or not, baptismal theology and practice will continue to divide the church but that need not worry us unduly. Of much more concern is what the world sees as it observes our baptismal practice and listens to our theological debates. A church in which the public witness of baptism speaks with clarity to a needy, hurting world would surely be on the right track in its theology and practice. A church where this witness is truly lived out in self giving mission will have a far more hopeful future as a united body than we might dare to dream. Just as Reformed Evangelicals in Ireland don't lose too much sleep about consistency in their theology of baptism, perhaps we should give ourselves to ensuring that in our baptising the world sees the Gospel embodied and in our speaking of baptism the world hears the Gospel proclaimed.