

³²*Ibid.*

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴WA 54, 183/Luther's Works: Vol. 34: *Career of the Reformer IV*, ed. Lewis W. Spitz (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), p. 334.

³⁵Saarnivaara, *Luther Discovers the Gospel*, p. 46.

³⁶Ernst Stracke, "Luthers grosses Selbstzeugnis 1545 ueber seine Entwicklung zum Reformator," *Schriften des Vereins fuer Reformationsgeschichte*, Vol. 44, No. 10 (1926), 129.

³⁷WA 54, 179-180/LW 34, 328.

³⁸WA 54, 185/LW 34, 336.

³⁹WA 54, 185/LW 34, 336.

⁴⁰WA 54, 185-186/LW 34, 336-337.

⁴¹William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: The New American Library, 1958), pp. 140-156.

⁴²WA 1, 695 (*Auslegung des 109 [110] Psalms*).

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴See n. 40.

⁴⁵WA 54, 186/LW 34, 338.

⁴⁶WA 7, 67. Martin Luther, *Three Treatises* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960), p. 306.

⁴⁷WA 1, 12 (Sermon on I John 4:5, 1512 or 1515).

⁴⁸WA 1, 627/LW 31, 250.

⁴⁹See n. 4.

⁵⁰Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), pp. 149-152.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, pp. 149-150.

⁵²WA 56, 272/LW 25, 260 (Lectures on Romans).

⁵³WA 3, 417/LW 10, 352 (*Dictata*)

The Return to Baptism

By ROBERT W. JENSON

"Nurture" and "Formation"

As has been customary for some years in this third slot, I am assigned to talk on the theme of the conference, "Baptism and Christian Formation," not as a discussion of Luther but as a discussion of *baptism* and *Christian formation*, inspired by Luther. And that is what I propose to do.

There is a word that I rather prefer to "formation," "nurture." Both are metaphors. "Nurture" is a more *agricultural* metaphor; one thinks of digging about something, dunging it, watering it, and so forth. "Formation" is a more *horticultural* metaphor; one thinks of pruning a plant into shape.

Nurture is providing the objective conditions—the earth, the water, the air, the nutrients—for life to grow, to grow not in the sense of becoming continuously bigger but in a sense of emerging or appearing. The seed falls into the earth and loses itself; then something that was not there before comes forth from it. That is the character of life—to live means endlessly to give up the old and be born in some sense anew, yet as the same life. Nurture is the provision of the necessary though never sufficient conditions for this marvel to occur.

Formation presupposes that the marvel is occurring, and that the shrub is a bit wild; it has to be pruned. Yet it is not to be pruned arbitrarily; there is a proper shape for an apple tree, just because it is an apple tree, and the good farmer is the one who so cuts the tree that it acquires its own true shape.

What Kind of Life?

If we are to talk of Christian nurture and Christian formation, manifestly the first question we have to ask is: which and what sort of life do we have in mind? If I nurture a rhododendron with alkaline fertilizer, it will not prosper; and if with my shears I form an apple under the impression that it is a peracantha, it will not do well either. What is this life that we propose to form and nurture in the Christian church? There can be only one possible answer—that life that emerges from the waters of baptism. That is the only answer that anybody has ever seriously given in the whole long history of the church.

Now notice the language I used: "emerges." For baptism is itself the casting of the old into the waters and the appearance of the new. Not just in Luther but in the whole tradition, baptism has never been understood as merely the *beginning* of new life. Baptism is that ending of the old and beginning of the new which is life, and which here is the specific new life we want to nurture. The Christian life and baptism, as both previous speakers have insisted, are exactly the same thing.

So aware of this was the New Testament church and the ancient church, that the very occurrence of any time *after* baptism was a problem for them: Do

we not emerge straight from the water into the kingdom of God? Why this sad waste of time in between? The old life ends when I submit myself to the waters, and the new self is an eschatological self, a self in the kingdom, a self in the Spirit. And this ending and this beginning, this baptism, are the life of God's saints. So how come all that space—for most of us anyway—between the bath and the kingdom? If there is a space there, it seems one ought to move on from baptism to something else to occupy it. But what would that something else be?

It is not too much to say that this question has been the tormenting question of western theological and liturgical history, the question upon which the geniuses of western civilization have beaten their heads until, as far as I am concerned, Luther answered it. What we do between baptism and the kingdom, said Luther, is not to march *forward* from baptism to something else but rather again and again to *return* to baptism—indeed, to “creep back into” it. Once it has been said, it is clear that this is the only answer Christianity can give. The only thing that one can say is to occupy the space between the bath and the kingdom, is that one lives *in* the bath, one returns *to* it.

Christian life, in the sense of a continuing history after baptism and before the kingdom, is not something initiated by baptism, not something we move on to from baptism; it is the *use* of baptism, the *enjoyment* of baptism. It is even—though the word is treacherous—the *repetition* of baptism. But Luther's terminology is after all the best. Life between baptism and the kingdom is the move “back into” baptism.

And that, of course, also answers our main question about Christian nurture and Christian formation. Christian nurture is providing the objective conditions for this return; and Christian formation means giving life the shape of this return.

Penance

Yet despite the necessity of these answers, we must, I suspect, find something mysterious about them. We are to spend our time between baptism and the kingdom returning to baptism. But how do we do that? We have a second-level version of Joseph of Arimathea's question: can a man enter a second time into the waters of baptism and be re-born? And *how* do we nurture and prune such a return?

The first answer is that if by this question we mean, how do *I* move myself back into baptism, and how do *I* nurture this return, and how do *I* give my life this shape, the answer is: “I do not. God does.” But God does that to *me* by way of *you*. We are to one another God's hands and God's mouth to nurture and to prune. And so there is still the question: what do the saints do to each other to nurture the return to baptism and to prune one another to the baptismal shape?

For Luther himself, the means of return were not quite so mysterious as they are for us. Luther lived in a church life that was dominated by the

sacrament of penance, which he indeed wanted radically to alter, but most assuredly not to abolish. When in the Large Catechism Luther talks about the use of baptism as “creeping back into it,” it is explicitly and precisely to a properly reformed sacrament of penance—and “sacrament” is what he calls it, “the third sacrament”—that he refers. The sacrament of penance had anciently been born as sort of a second baptism for those who blew the first one; and in its liturgical form it was in fact a repetition of those parts of baptism that can be repeated. In all its vicissitudes it had never lost this association.

How do we return to baptism? A first answer, that Luther did not ever have to make explicit, runs like this: give up your past life again to the judgment of God, as you did when you first gave up yourself to the waters. And again wait for the blessing of God's minister, as when you first waited to hear him say, in the text of Luther's own baptismal order: “The almighty and merciful God, who has begotten you again by water and the Spirit and has forgiven all your sins, strengthen and preserve you. . . .”

Two vital points can now be made. One will round out this more analytical part of my lecture. The second will be the springboard for a more argumentative and perhaps controversial part.

Point one. When Luther said that Christian life is the return to baptism, and when he said that our Lord intends the whole life of believers to be one vast sacrament of penance, the intention—we can now see—is the same. And if we consider Luther's second way of speaking, we may discern in it, in its identity with the baptismal way of speaking, a general interpretation of Christian life: Christian life, as a whole and as any of its pieces, has the before-and-after, the death-and-new-birth, of baptism, as its *structure*.

We may look at the life of the believer as one whole event: that so-and-so lives. Then we can quite literally say that so-and-so emerges from the water of baptism straight into the kingdom, and that all the time between is simply the emerging. Or we may look at an experience or a period or a part of so-and-so's life. Then we will have the same pattern to describe. In every event of believing life, there is the same pattern: the death of the old and the birth of the new.

The Sacramentality of Nurture

Point two. The return to baptism occurs fundamentally as penance: I confess to a fellow believer and wait for the sound of his voice and—in my tradition—the pressure of his hand upon my head. This suggests a proposition about nurture and formation, which I will hold even if Luther turns out not to: Christian nurture and Christian formation are fundamentally sacramental, and in the literal sense. Christian nurture—providing to one another the objective conditions for the return to baptism—is first and foremost that the saints provide to one another sacramental acts that in fact perform this return as an event in their lives. And Christian formation is that the saints provide to one another sacramental acts that shape life to the baptismal pattern, that

prune and discipline it to that way.

If indeed baptism is both the reality and the continuing shape of Christian life, then the life we are concerned to nurture and form in the church differs from all other life in one decisive respect: the new thing that emerges from the old was not there before. The mighty oak that comes from the little acorn was in the acorn all the time, "potentially," as we say. The good student that emerges from the apparent dunce was there all the time. He or she was "a late bloomer," we say. What occurs is only a blooming; the bud was there. For the emergence of the oak and the student, we use the paired concepts of *potential* and *development*. The student is potentially learned—we keep telling ourselves—even if not actually learned; what is required is that this potentiality shall be actualized. As that happens, we say, "Ah, Smith is finally developing."

For the kind of life in which the new that emerges was in the old all the time we use the paired concepts of potentiality and development. Just so, those concepts do not fit baptismal life at all. For in the case of baptismal life, it is *death* that intervenes between the old self and the new.

It is Christ's death that at all grants me an eschatological new self. It is into death, therefore, that I follow him to my new self. And it is death that baptism sacramentally anticipates. And so it is death that is the pivot of each experience or part of life that has baptism's pattern. I must, after all, quote Luther one more time. "What does such baptism with water mean?" "That the old Adam with all his sins and evil lusts shall be drowned and put to death by daily sorrow and repentance, and that the new man may daily emerge and be resurrected. . . ." Thus baptism does not draw out a potential new self that was there all the time. It *brings* the new self. The new Jenson is not there all the time as a potential. He is brought *to* and *into* the old Jenson.

That is why the new self's birth is accomplished by a sacramental act, by *water-baptism*, and not just by spirit- or word-baptism. The new self born in baptism is a self that grasps God's word of promise. And this word, the promise that I listen to in baptism and in baptismal life, is and remains a word I have to *hear*, a word I have to *listen to*, that each time is spoken *to* me from outside me, with assurances I cannot grant to myself. In the providence of God, it is to secure this externality of the word, that the word binds itself to uncompromisingly external acts; to a bath with water, to a meal with bread and cup, or to a gestured sign of the cross. Because the gospel-word binds itself to baptism's bath, I am prevented from persuading myself that I have the gospel in my head, and don't need to *hear* it anymore. For there is no way I am going to get that tub of water into my head. By being the word *with* that water, the baptismal promise secures itself against my inveterate urge to incorporate everything into myself and pretend it came out of me all the time, pretend that the new self born of the word is a self that I brought forth, that I was potentially a saint all the time.

Therefore, baptism is water-baptism and has to be water-baptism to be any

baptism at all. Therefore, also, all the saints' days and experiences, so far as they show the pattern of baptism, of death and resurrection, depend upon sacramental externality, e.g. on the physical presence of the minister of penance and on his gesture of the cross—in the old Norwegian Lutheran rite that I grew up in, on the firm presence of a hand pressing down on your head until you felt it was God's own hand.

It is the externality of the sacraments that also constitutes the only possible evangelical "discipline" or "formation." For in their externality the sacraments are indeed a pattern that is just *there*. The experience I go through when I share the Eucharist is not shaped by what I happen to feel about it, it is shaped by the liturgy. It is a pattern that is *given*, and just so can prune and trim and mold the pattern of my life to the baptismal pattern—the death of the old and the birth of the new. The experience I undergo in penance is not the experience that I shape for the moment out of the spontaneity of my existence, it is given by the liturgy, and just so is able to mold me to the baptismal pattern of death and rebirth.

The Loss of Nurturing Sacraments

Thus the nature of the return to baptism means that it would have had to be sacramental somehow. In fact, the church's life has through most of its history provided two sacraments of nurture and formation: penance as the explicit and direct enactment of the return from the old self to the new, and the Supper as the real experience of the new self to which we turn. Where these two are, as the Confessions put it, "administered in accord with the gosepl," nurture and formation cannot go far wrong. Where they are not, nothing else will be any use.

Perhaps now we can explain the futility and desperation of our more recent attempts at nurture and formation. Why, after all, are these suddenly the topic of every conference in the American Christian church? Because we perceive how manifestly we have failed in them. And we have failed because we have abolished penance and removed the Supper from most new Christians, that is, from those who most need it.

Penance first. Confession of sin "directly to God," as we say, is for our present concern entirely beside the point. For what we mean when we say we are going to confess "directly" to God, is that we are going to bypass sacraments. But whatever may be the use of such unmediated approach to God, the value of confession and forgiveness for *nurture* and *formation* depends on its sacramental character; that is, on the physical presence of the confessor, on the actual sound of his voice inquiring into behavior and declaring absolution, on the sight—above all the sight—of another human, external to me, other than me, being there for me on God's behalf.

No more is *corporate* confession of sins to the point in this connection. For it is not and cannot be *my* past self, in the particularities of my failings and virtues, that is there recited and so given over to God. Corporate confession

can only by accident, once in a great while, serve *my* death and new birth, my return to baptism.

Having abolished penance, we have, so far as the Supper is concerned, adopted the weird practice of baptizing whole masses of persons in infancy and then depriving them for years together of the sacramental reality of the new selfhood into which they have been baptized. It may be that there are reasons for not communicating infants. But if there are, they must all tell also against baptizing infants; for what one baptizes infants *into* is the Supper. The new self that emerges from the waters of baptism is sacramentally given as the Supper.

I suspect that some of you will want to come back to this matter in the question period, so I will drop it for the moment. I content myself with this: the new LCA statement on this matter is a disastrous and tyrannical law that fixes an evil practice upon us just at the point where we were finally starting to break through it. It should hardly be surprising that, as the survey teams so notoriously discovered a few years ago, hardly any of our people understand Christianity evangelically. Babies born and instantly kicked out into the cold rarely do well.

Luther himself, of course, did not see this problem. It is a problem made unavoidable by the conditions of *our* time, not of his. He could still depend, and for all his radicalism did depend, on a Christian culture. It was still possible to baptize infants and then drop them sacramentally, counting on the influences of the whole culture and the whole educational reality to hold them in place until we got around to picking them up again. It was possible to do this without even noticing what we were doing. We cannot count on that anymore. Just so, we can no longer avoid noticing how bad the system always was.

If we are seriously concerned for "nurture" and "formation" of baptismal life, the first thing we will do is to find ways for the practice of penance. The second thing we will do is to sustain all we baptize from the first moment on with the sacramental food of the Supper. And we will go on to use all our devotion and all our ingenuity to surround ourselves and all the saints with sacramental enactments of the gospel at every turn of life and of every possible kind. We will restore baptism to its historic grandeur and involve all the congregation in it. We will make the Supper a Eucharist and not a sort of a filling station of private blessings. We will teach children the sign of the cross. We will have corporate prayers, prayers where there is a liturgy so that there is a pattern into which we are shaped. We will do many such things.

From Natural to Sacramental Pedagogy

I turn finally to Christian nurture and formation as a *teaching* enterprise. The nurture and formation of baptismal life are not *only* teaching, they are fundamentally sacramental. But they are also teaching.

Here I have first a critical point. At least within Western culture, there has always been a sort of "natural" pedagogy, a pedagogy built around the concepts of potentiality, development, and readiness. In this natural pedagogy of

our culture, education is understood as the bringing out of *potentialities* already in the person. The great pedagogical knack is to divine when each such potentiality is ready to unfold itself, when it is *ready*. And the whole history is thus a *developmental* process, a progressive unfolding of potentialities given from the beginning.

We have already seen that the concepts of potentiality and development have no application to specifically baptismal life. I will not say that the pedagogy organized by them has *no* application to baptismal life, but the application is very limited. Any historical process can, if we want, be described by the concepts of potential and development. Thus we may, if we want, say, e.g., that most children seem able to discuss the Eucharist at about age 10 and so speak of a potential that is ready to develop at that time. But such concepts, while they may be thus used *descriptively*, can have no valid *prescriptive* application to baptismal life. To speak of readiness for *faith* or readiness for the *word* or readiness for the *Supper* as the LCA statement does, is, I think, actually blasphemous.

Consider now what has happened to us: we have deprived ourselves of the very possibility of baptismal nurture during the time when it is most needed, and of the possibility of a secure and fully developed nurture at any time. But nurture like nature abhors a vacuum. If there cannot be baptismal nurture, there will be some other kind. If there cannot be baptismal formation, there will be some other kind. What has inevitably rushed into the vacuum—at least now during the period of the collapse of Christian culture—is just that natural pedagogy I earlier described. This natural pedagogy can only nurture and form that religious life to which it is adapted: the religious life which does, indeed, occur as the development of a religious potential always present in the human individual. That is to say, what this pedagogy can nurture and form is "natural religion," the religion which consists of the unfolding of the religious wants and propensities of the human animal.

That is to say, not to put too fine a point on it, what this pedagogy can nurture and form is works-righteousness. What Sunday School and vacation school and all the rest teach, despite all the best efforts of pastors and professors and bureaucrats and the whole crew of us, is how to "be good Christians" and how "to be saved." We all know that. What I want to insist upon now is that this is not the fault of ill-trained teachers or faulty materials or anything else that a new synodical or denominational program might fix. It is the only thing desacramentalized religious nurture *can* and *will* teach, the intentions and the training and equipment of the teachers be what they may.

Theology and Sacramental Culture

What then *should* our nurture and formation by teaching be? Supposing we had the necessary sacramental nurture to support it? I again have two points.

Point one. The Christian culture of our society may be breaking up. I think it is. But there is another Christian culture which the sacramental life of the

church itself creates as its own environment. This interior culture of the church is, like any culture, composed of texts and tunes and images and peculiarities of vocabulary and syntax. That is, it is composed of the hymns and the repeated prayers and forms of prayer and the Bible stories and funny churchly etiquette and the iconography and the creeds and much more. It is not the "meaning" of these things or their "relevance" or their "interpretation" that is the Christian sacramental culture; it is simply the hymns and prayers and forms of prayer and creeds and images in and of themselves. It is as texts to be *recited*, and as gestures to be done *automatically*, and as tunes one does *not* need to sing out of the book, that the interior culture of the church's sacramental life exists.

The first task of Christian nurture and formation is to *initiate* into this culture, as it is indeed the first task of any nurture and formation to initiate into a culture. A catechism—leaving out for the moment the "what does this mean" bits—is simply a collection of sacramental-cultural items. What, e.g., the Lord's Supper "means," is mostly learned by *experience* of the Supper; it never was and never will be learned in classes. What can be taught in classes is Eucharistic hymns, and prayers, and gestures, and even etiquette, and perhaps something of the history of these things. Or again, e.g., children's choirs should not sing little ditties written only for them, that they stop singing when they grow up. They should sing the hymns that they will sing all their lives in the congregation. And if they do not "understand" them, that makes not a whit of difference. Sunday schools pupils should learn Bible *stories*, not the "significance" of the stories or the proper "interpretation" of the stories or the contemporary "relevance" of the stories, but first of all just the stories as these make up the *narrative culture* of the church's sacramental life.

Children should learn the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed, and the Ten Commandments; and they should learn them before they are able to understand them. Or when is "before," come to think of it? Professor Grane might ask, "How do we *know* when they understand them?"

I see baptismal sponsors who have to read the creed from the book, and who have trouble finding the page. I am not much comforted by the thought of all the undoubtedly excellent counseling that preceded this. Bishops and synodical committees and clergy continually berate the Seminary for not teaching—something—though they are not quite sure what it is. This is what it is: seminary graduates do not know the Bible stories, they do not know the hymns, they do not know the prayers. The reason is that they did not know them when they came here; and teaching them has been the traditional job of—bishops and synodical committees and pastors.

Point two. In Luther's catechism there are the items of sacramental culture, which are simply to be acquired, *and* there are the "what does this mean" bits. Churchly teaching, besides the initiatory teaching just discussed, has also *theology* to teach. The saints must be assisted in their inevitable attempt to *think through* their assignment as saints, to understand the creed they have

memorized.

Here I would like to suggest a principle of readiness that does not depend on the notion of inherent potential. Clearly, two-year-olds cannot be led to deeper understanding of the Supper by being told that, to quote my own published presentation, "The Supper is a sacrament in that it anticipates the eschaton." In teaching two-year-olds, this has to be borne in mind. But this sort of consideration should not be allowed to dictate the curriculum, that is, the succession of reflections to be undertaken. Rather, the congregation has its own curriculum, a curriculum of bestowed responsibilities in the community, each of which responsibilities has its own demands of understanding and interpretation.

Within the church, I may, e.g., become a parent. Then suddenly I have to do what I did not do before. My two-year-old daughter asked me, having learned to pray, "I'm talking to God; is that right, Daddy?" I said, "Yes." She said, "Where is he?" Then I needed theological expertise. Indeed, a course for new Christian parents might well be the major item in the whole churchly curriculum. Or again, voting membership is a new responsibility. Liturgical ministry is another. It would not take much ingenuity to organize an entire curriculum of readinesses of this sort.

Summing Up

Christian nurture and Christian formation are of baptismal life. Since this life is death and resurrection, its nurture and its formation must be first of all sacramental, the ever-repeated gift of God of the new life that I have not. Insofar as Christian nurture and formation are also teaching, the function of such teaching is, first, initiation into the culture of the sacraments, and, second, a curriculum of theological study and reflection based upon the inherent curriculum of a congregation that has such culture.