

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