TPC Baptismal Liturgy – Notes

With all the baptisms we've had lately, I thought it would be good to remind you where our baptismal liturgy (vows, prayers, etc.) for infants comes from.

Note that the vows are not of the essence of baptism. According to our constitution, they are optional, so if parents do not want to use them, they do not have to. We use them on a regular basis mainly as a way of doing things in good order. They are pastorally valuable. The vows give the elders "handles" if they ever need to remind parents of their obligations. (e.g., "Don't you remember what you promised you would do with this child when she was baptized?"). The vows also provide a public way of demonstrating why this particular child has a right to baptism, namely, her parents are trusting in God and believe the promises God has made to and about their child.

The first three vows basically string to together a bunch of things the Bible says about baptism, covenant children, and the responsibilities of parents. Note all the Scripture references (and Scriptural language):

> To the parents:
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> 1. Do you bring this child for baptism in faith, trusting in God's covenant promises to be your child's God (Gen. 17:7) and Savior from sin (Acts 16:31;1 Pt. 3:21), persuaded that God desires to receive your child into his family and flock (Mt. 18:1-14), and speaking on his behalf as his representative and sponsor (Mt. 15:22)?
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> 2. Do you bring this child for baptism in faith, trusting God to unite him to Christ in his death and resurrection (Rom. 6:1-14); to clothe him with Christ (Gal. 3:27); to make him a member of the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13) and the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 19:14); to give him the Holy Spirit (Isa. 59:21; Acts 2:38-39); to bestow righteousness upon him (Ps. 103:17); to make him holy (1 Cor. 7:14); to forgive his sins (Acts 22:16); and to make this baptism his entrance into the new creation in Christ Jesus (Tit. 3:5)?
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> 3. Do you promise in faith and in reliance upon the grace of God to disciple this child by teaching him all of Christ's commandments (Mt. 28:18-20); directing him to fear and obey God (Gen. 18:19; Ecc. 12:13) and to love the Lord his God with all his heart, soul, mind, and

> strength (Dt. 6:1-25); and to bring him up in the training and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4), that he might walk worthy of the calling he has received in the gospel all throughout his life (Eph. 4:1)?

The fourth and fifth vows are from Christian baptismal liturgies that go back to earliest centuries of the church. Just like the words we use in the "preface" to communion, the pre-baptismal vows renouncing of Satan and affirming the Creed are found in Hippolytus' *Apostolic Constitutions*, dating from 215 AD (http://www.bombaxo.com/hippolytus.html). Hippolytus committed much of the church's liturgy to writing because he was concerned about innovations creeping into the church in his day and wanted to preserve the "old" traditions! Here are the fourth and fifth vows:

> 4. In the name of your child, and on his behalf: Do you renounce the devil and all his works; the vain pomp and false glory of the world, with all its covetous desires; and the sinful inclinations of the flesh, so that you will not follow, nor be led by them?
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> 5. In the name of your child, and on his behalf: Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth; in the Lord Jesus Christ, his only begotten Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered and was crucified for us; who then rose again from the dead on the third day and now reigns at the right hand of his Father; and who will return in glory to judge the living and the dead; and do you believe in the Holy Spirit; the one holy catholic and apostolic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and life everlasting?

The vows conclude with a traditional response from the congregation. In Presbyterian churches, typically every member is called upon to be a godparent (or godbrother or godsister) to the child being baptized (though at TPC, we'd certainly allow specific godparents too, if desired, per the constitution). Thus, the entire local body is asked to respond to this question:

> To the congregation:
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> Do you, the congregation of Trinity Presbyterian Church, promise to undertake the responsibility of assisting these parents as they nurture this child in Christian faith and practice to the glory of God?

Note that while there is a lot going on in baptisms at TPC – prayer, Scripture reading, vows, more prayer, a declaration, and singing – none of these things obscure the amazing simplicity of baptism itself. At its heart, the rite is still a washing with water in the Triune name, nothing more, nothing less. Everything else is optional. Of course, many through the ages have found baptism's simplicity scandalous. Along the way, especially in the fourth and fifth centuries, the church made baptism progressively more elaborate, including an exorcism ritual, a clothing ritual, an anointing-with-oil ritual, etc. There is certainly a good deal of symbolic meaning in those actions – but I agree with the Reformers that these accretions were more harmful than helpful because they came to overshadow the water rite itself and needed to be stripped away. Baptism does not need to be "enhanced" with additional, complicated symbolic actions; washing with water in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is fully adequate to get the job done. Besides, all those other things are contained in the water rite; there is no need to do them as separate ritual actions.

At this point, I generally use one of two basic forms for the prayers and declarations that surround the baptism and vows. (We may add more forms in the future for more variety.) One of these forms comes from the 1559 version of the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer,* and the other combines pieces of Martin Bucer's 1537 liturgy with the classic French Reformed liturgy.

Why use these vintage forms? These are among the most theologically rich and beautiful liturgies ever written. They elegantly communicate what baptism is all about. Note that there is not really anything un-Presbyterian about using the 1559 ("Elizabethan") *Book of Common Prayer.* At that juncture in history, the Presbyterians and Anglicans had still not split from one another governmentally; all English-speaking Protestants in Britain were part of the same English, Reformed church. Nineteenth-century Presbyterian liturgist and historian Charles Shields explained that,

> The [earliest versions of the] *Book of Common Prayer* dated from a time *prior* to the separation of Presbyterians and Episcopalians into different parties and prior to the expulsion of Presbyterians from the Church of England. It was therefore properly as much a Presbyterian as an Episcopalian possession.

Of course, the early editions of the *Book of Common Prayer* were just Protestantized, Reformed versions of the classic liturgies that had been used in the church for centuries, now adapted by the literary genius of Thomas Cranmer.

If you have ever wondered why so much of our liturgy "feels" Anglican, this is your answer: It *is* Anglican in many respects. Presbyterians were originally "prayer book" people too! Eventually, Presbyterians reacted against what they perceived to be Anglican excesses (especially state-enforcement of the liturgy), but both Anglicans and Presbyterians share a common history and liturgical root in the 1549, 1552, and 1559 editions of the *Book of Common Prayer.* John Calvin and his close friend Martin Bucer both heartily approved of Cranmer's work, and wrote similar liturgical books themselves. The liturgy we use includes this post-baptismal declaration from the *Book of Common Prayer:*

> Seeing now, dearly beloved brethren, that this child is regenerate, adopted, and grafted into the body of Christ, let us receive him in Christ's name. We do indeed welcome this child into the congregation of Christ's flock and family, and pray that he will never be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified, and will manfully fight under the banner of the cross against sin, against the world, and against the devil; and will continue to be Christ's faithful soldier and servant to life's end, living the rest of his days according to this good beginning. Amen.
> **People: Amen!**

Martin Bucer's 1537 liturgy was one of the most important liturgical documents of the early Protestant movement. The Reformation created an explosion of new confessions of faith, catechisms, and liturgies. Many of them are not as well as known today as they should be, and Bucer's work certainly falls into that category. Bucer was the pastor in Strassborg, Germany from 1523-1547, then was exiled to England in 1549, where he lived out his days working closely with Cranmer on reforming the English church. When Calvin was driven from Geneva in 1538-1541, he actually took refuge in Strassborg, forming a deep and mutually beneficial relationship with Bucer. If Calvin baptized anyone while he was there from 1538-1541, he almost certainly used the very same prayer from Bucer's liturgy that we use at TPC:

> Almighty God, heavenly Father, we give you eternal praise and thanks, that you have granted and bestowed upon this child your fellowship, that you have born him again to yourself through holy baptism, that he has been incorporated into your beloved son, our only savior, and is now your child and heir…

We also use a declaration that comes from French Reformed liturgy:

Do not fear, says the Lord, for I have redeemed you, I called you by your name, you are mine. When the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed, says the Lord, my kindness shall not depart from you, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed. Little child, for you Jesus-Christ came into the world, labored and suffered; for you, he went through the agony of Gethsemane and the darkness of Calvary; for you, he cried: « It is finished! »; for you, he died and for you he triumphed over death; yes, for you, little child, the declaration holds true, We love God, because he first loved us. Amen!
People: Amen!

While this is a more recent liturgy, it's obviously consistent with the classic Reformed theology of baptism.

None of these liturgies give an unconditional guarantee of salvation for the baptized child; they do, however, emphasize that baptism is God's free gift, and a means through which Christ and all his benefits are bestowed upon those who receive baptism in faith. The text boxes I usually put in the bulletin give a more detailed explanation:

Why does our baptismal liturgy so closely associate the sacrament of baptism with regeneration and forgiveness? This is simply a reflection of biblical language (Acts 2:38, 22:16; Tit. 3:5) and the church's historic language. All of our baptismal forms are based on traditional Reformed sources. While such language is open to misunderstanding and abuse, it has strong biblical and historical backing. All the classic Reformed confessions insist that baptism is ultimately *God's work,* performed in and through the human agency of the church. They also insist that the one baptized must respond to God's act and offer in baptism with a living, persevering faith – which faith is ultimately the gift of God!

The efficacy of baptism does not mean that baptism guarantees eternal salvation. But it does mean that baptism marks the beginning of a person's new life in the covenant family and in the church of Jesus Christ. Baptism must be received in faith or it is received in vain. Baptism is an instrument God uses to offer and apply Christ to us, along with the preaching of the Word and the Lord's Supper. Our Westminster Shorter Catechism helpfully describes baptism as an "effectual means of salvation" because of "the blessing of Christ and

the working of his Spirit" (91). In baptism, "Christ and the benefits of the new covenant, are represented, sealed, and applied to believers" (92). Baptism is not a form of magic, but neither is it an empty sign. Instead, it is an act of God's grace, by which he grafts us into Christ and makes us his people (Rom. 6:1-14; Gal. 3:27). We must receive the promises of baptism in faith and with repentance. When we witness a baptism, it is a wonderful opportunity to remember our own baptisms, and the privileges and obligations of covenant membership. God has made us his special people; let us live accordingly.

Why do we baptize the children of believers? Because all of God's covenants throughout Scripture include the children of his people (e.g., Gen. 17:7; Acts 2:39). God makes promises not only to individuals but to families. These promises give our children the right to baptism because God claims them as his own. The new humanity God is forming in Christ includes people of every age and stage in life, including infants (Mt. 19:13). Thus, we know that God loves our children, and desires their salvation (Mt. 18:1-14). He puts his Spirit upon them (Isa. 59:21) and works faith within them (Ps. 22:9-10). They are holy (1 Cor. 7:14) and righteous (Ps. 103:17) in his sight.

None of this is to say that our children are automatically saved by the covenant or by baptism. They must own the covenant for themselves by faith and must grow into obedience and perseverance. This is why parents promise to nurture their children in Christian faith and practice. Parents are to disciple their children by raising them in the Lord. Baptism provides a reliable foundation for parents to build upon and a tangible way of assuring our children that they belong to God and should live as faithful members of his kingdom.

Why do we have our parents normally take vows on behalf of the child being baptized? Such vows are not essential to the sacrament of baptism. But they do help clarify the meaning of baptism and demonstrate why *this particular child* has a right to baptism. The vows show that the parents are bringing their child to God in faith, on the basis of the covenant promises. They are offering their child to God, and receiving him back as one who now belongs to the covenant of grace in an official way. The parents promise to follow up to the

baptism with discipleship, so that the child will mature as a covenant-keeper.

Obviously, if you want to follow up on any of this, you can refer back to baptismal sermons I have preached at TPC, or I can recommend quite a few helpful books and articles.

Hopefully that helps explain where some of the baptismal language we use comes from. We're not doing anything new, nor are we trying to repristinate a by-gone era. We *are* trying to creatively adapt the best of our Reformed, catholic tradition to contemporary usage.