

“Like a Fish in Water”: Reclaiming Baptism in an Anabaptist Church

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ABSTRACT

This may be the first time in church history that people self-identify as Christians but are not baptized. What happens when the church loses touch with a significant practice? This essay argues that Anabaptists need a robust “baptismal ecology” to reinvigorate and animate their imagination. Baptism bears within it the shape of the Christian life. The author focuses particularly on how the Biblical image of baptism as death and drowning shapes the contours of the life of discipleship, resisting the hegemony of the world’s politics, and concludes that Anabaptists need both robust baptismal practices and a much stronger baptismal ecology to live out their calling.

Introduction

In a now famous commencement address, writer David Foster Wallace told this legendary parable: Two young fish are swimming along and they meet an older fish coming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys, how’s the water?” The two young fish swim on for a bit, and then one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?”¹

I love this story because it recognizes how we can fail to see something so obvious, so familiar, so commonsensical, and so ubiquitous. Reflecting on the meaning of water, specifically the waters of baptism, has been my quest for the past five years, particularly as I’ve engaged young adults at Canadian Mennonite University. Baptism is one of the most primal of all Christian practices (sacraments, ordinances, rites),² and the one that initiates

¹ This address, given at Kenyon College in Ohio on May 21, 2005, was later published in David Foster Wallace, *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (Boston, MA: Little Brown and Company, 2009).

² William Willimon, “A Liberating Word in Water,” <https://www.religion-online.org/article/a-liberating-word-in-water/>. This article appeared in *The Christian Century* (March 22, 1978): 302-306.

believers into the Christian community and points to a way of life. It is, as Pseudo-Dionysius claimed, “a ‘divine birth’ through which we are marked as members of the body of Christ.”³ From the church’s early beginnings, the followers of Jesus are commanded to baptize new disciples in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. While the act seems simply to involve a washing in the name of the Trinity, it is—or ought to be—a defining act. We may ask, *How do you know if someone is Christian? And Are they baptized?*

The past couple of decades have presented serious challenges for those practicing baptism in the Anabaptist tradition. While the issue of an “open table”—whether confessing Christians who are unbaptized can participate in the Lord’s Supper—has raised significant questions, baptism invites questions that are just as significant: *Why are so many self-identified (confessing) Christian people in our pews not baptized?* Or, in the words of one young adult, *Why do I need to be baptized? I don’t need baptism in order to be a Christian.* This response is lamentable and frequently evokes my reply, *But why don’t you desire it?* For at least some young adults and many of the rest of us, the rich treasures of baptismal practice appear to have diminished, and our imagination around baptism is remarkably sluggish. The meaning of water is lost or at least goes unnoticed.

Let me suggest that we need a more robust “baptismal ecology” to reinvigorate and animate our imagination. This concept captures well the rich fecundity of the ordinance of baptism in the Christian tradition,⁴ and assumes a rhizomatic web of meaning through symbols and symbolic actions. Equally important, it also recognizes reciprocity: the interrelatedness of baptism and life in Christ; the deeply personal life of faith and life in the Christian community and the church; and the interrelationship of baptismal practices, the Lord’s Supper, and peacemaking.⁵ Baptism is more

³ Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 201, as cited in Kendra G. Hotz and Matthew T. Matthews, *Shaping the Christian Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 141.

⁴ For an understanding of an “ecology” of baptism in relation to practices of youth ministry and Christian formation, see Fred P. Edie, *Book, Bath, Table and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007).

⁵ While the water of baptism has considerable implications for Christian ethics and a sustainable way of life, its ecological implications will not be explored here. See Benjamin M.

than simply an event or occasion that occurs in a given place and time. It fosters an imagination of what it means to live a Christian life, to follow Jesus. It embodies an imagination of the very contours of discipleship and is therefore a matter of crucial importance.⁶

If we regard baptism as merely an event or occasion, we can easily become distracted by side issues such as the best form of the ritual (immersion or pouring?), the ideal age of baptismal candidates, the role of the catechism, and so on. These questions are important, but risk missing the forest for the trees and neglecting the richness of baptism as practiced over the centuries. To focus on the act itself is to stop at its watery surface. We must go down deeper, engaging with the breadth and depth of the practice, and adopt a baptismal ecology that fosters imagination. Most importantly, the image of baptismal dying and death uncovers the political and social nature of the practice that imagines an identity distinct from secular politics and rooted in an understanding of the church itself as a political community, a *polis*.⁷ Baptism exposes a different account of politics in a counter-story of opposition or a dying to the hegemony of the world's politics.

In what follows I will begin by outlining an Anabaptist-Mennonite baptismal ecology and considering how baptism contains within it the core of what it means to live a Christian life. Then I will examine the contours

Steward, "Water in Worship: the Ecology of Baptism," *Christian Century* (February 8, 2011); <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2011-01/water-worship>.

⁶ See Rowan Williams, "Sacramental Living," St. Peter's Public Lectures, Trinity College/University of Melbourne, May 14 and 16, 2002. <https://www.trinity.unimelb.edu.au/getmedia/b1ef15dc-6fdc-4212-81ed-c699ca1dd1f9/TrinityPaper32.aspx>.

⁷ Images of the church are well developed by theologians such as Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder. See Stanley Hauerwas, *In Good Company: The Church as Polis* (South Bend, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1994); Arne Rasmussen, *The Church as Polis* (South Bend, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1995); John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003). (Perhaps the best-known Mennonite theologian of the 20th century, Yoder is also remembered for his long-term sexual harassment and abuse of women. Documentation and discussion of these abuses is found at <http://mennoniteusa.org/menno-snapshots/john-howard-yoder-digest-recent-articles-about-sexual-abuse-and-discernment-2/> and in *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 89, no. 1 (January 2015).—Ed.) Elizabeth Philips argues that political theology more generally did not originate from Christian theology but from Athens, where politics was understood as the art of seeking the common good of the polis. Baptism as a political practice bears the contours of this vision of the common good. See Elizabeth Philips, *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), 4.

of the life of discipleship by employing the most frequent image used for baptism in the New Testament, death and drowning.⁸

Baptismal Ecology: Water’s Mystery

To claim that baptism contains within it the contours of the Christian life suggests a more sacramental notion of the practice than some Anabaptists have traditionally accepted. While not providing a full defense of sacramental theology here, I want to claim that Christian ordinances and sacraments are gifts given to the church; they are human actions through which God acts. This view, held by the early Anabaptists even as they resisted the sacramentalism of the time, remains true today. When we participate in baptism things happen that we do not fully understand. This is perhaps one of the first gifts of Baptism, the Lord’s Supper, and the other ordinances: they operate in the realm of mystery and at the boundaries of our understanding. If we were to try to analyze the mystery, we would miss its most important gift, which is that we will never fully grasp God’s working in our lives. All our ordinances, sacraments, and worship in general call for relinquishing human control—a letting go of the compulsion to manage, master, and manipulate—and for allowing God to move us into holy presence. Rituals such as baptism are participatory experiences that enable believers to move from concrete reality where water is “just water” to another reality where water carries them into a world beyond the world of facts, rationality, and a linear understanding of time. In baptism believers are submerged in the new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, and immersed in the grace, love, and mystery of God.

A vital source for a stronger baptismal ecology is liturgical theology, which considers the *symbolic* significance of a particular rite. “Symbol” comes from the Greek “to throw together,”⁹ and meanings are indeed thrown and layered together through symbols. Liturgical theologian Aiden Kavanagh suggests that symbols “allow many different people to put them on, so to speak, in different ways. . . . Symbols coax one into a swamp of

⁸ Other images of baptism in the NT include “washing” (Acts 22:16; Heb. 10:19-25), “circumcision” (Col. 2:10-14), and “drinking” the Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13).

⁹ Gail Ramshaw, *Christian Worship: 100,000 Sundays of Symbols and Rituals* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 16.

meaning and require one to frolic in it.”¹⁰ Because communities and cultures are shaped by their shared symbols, to understand a particular community or culture requires understanding their symbols and the meanings they have accumulated over time. All religions use immense symbol systems to communicate the meaning of the past, interpret the present, imagine the future, and present how life should be. The symbols enable people to face the ultimate and mysterious: the meaning of life, of being, of suffering and death. Symbols radiate something of this ultimate mystery, which for Christians is God.¹¹

In the Christian symbol system, baptism inaugurates believers into a complex world of meaning: water is never *just* water. Additionally, as Gail Ramshaw suggests, a symbol “not only is something, it does something.”¹² Because symbols intensify belief and the making of meaning, baptism truly “does something” by involving the person’s whole self, “humanity at full stretch.”¹³

Symbols are also bridges that unite people with each other and with God.¹⁴ The power of effective symbols, such as the water of baptism, brings the past into the present, transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, and carries an imagination for the future. Baptism is multi-layered and multi-valent; it is visual, verbal, physical, and thick with meaning. It is both deeply personal and communal, both intimate and political. Unfortunately, the church has often been misled to consider baptism in primarily cognitive and cerebral ways, and thus to miss its mysterious and abundant richness.¹⁵

¹⁰ Aiden Kavanagh, *Elements of Rite: A Handbook of Liturgical Style* (New York: Pueblo, 1966), 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Ramshaw, *Christian Worship* 16.

¹³ Don Saliers, “Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 7, no. 2 (1979): 173-89. Saliers argues that “questions concerning Christian ethics and the shape of the moral life cannot be adequately understood apart from thinking about how Christians worship” (173). The ethical shape of Mennonite life can also best be understood when connected to its liturgical practices including baptism.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Esther De Waal, *Seeking Life: The Baptismal Invitation of the Rule of St. Benedict* (Norwich, UK: Canterbury Press, 2009), 5-8.

Waters That Kill Us: Peace, Justice, and the Baptismal Imagination

The New Testament captures the multi-layered and multi-valent nature of baptism in various symbolic ways. Perhaps the most obvious is washing. When Ananias is about to baptize Paul, he says, “And now why do you delay? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name” (Acts 22:16). The association of baptism with the washing away of sins appears in both the baptism of John the Baptist (Mark 1:4) and the baptism of Pentecost, where thousands of converts are told that they must be baptized in the name of Jesus, “so that your sins may be forgiven” (Acts 2:38). However, the predominant way of speaking about baptism in the NT, including the letters of Paul, is as *drowning* or *death*:

You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. And you, who were dead... , God made alive together with him... He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him. (Colossians 2:12-15)

For the early church, the symbolic interpretation of baptism was not that it was simply a spiritual “drowning” but that it contained a political imagination for all of life,¹⁶ including justice and peacemaking.

Similarly, it is difficult to read the stories of the first Anabaptists and not be struck by the deeply political meaning that baptism had for them: it was literally about life and death, and everything in between. Baptism put them at odds with social norms, “the powers,” and cultural identities; it was a practice of peaceful resistance that for many resulted in violent death; and, ironically, it was baptism on the basis of confession of faith that led many Anabaptists to a watery martyrdom by drowning. Their baptismal imagination fully captured their hearts, minds, and bodies. This is not surprising, given the Anabaptists’ turning back to the early church. Baptism always involved a saying no (a renunciation, a “dying”) as well as a saying

16 Elsewhere I have examined baptismal theology, arguing that much of what the church believes about baptism is what we all believe about water more generally. See Irma Fast Dueck, “Re-Learning to Swim in Baptismal Waters: Contemporary Challenges in the Believers Church Tradition,” in *New Perspective in Believers Church Ecclesiology*, eds. Abe Dueck, Helmut Harder, and Karl Koop (Winnipeg, MB: CMU Press, 2010).

yes (an allegiance, a “living”). Liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemmann traces the roots of renunciation to the third-century church finding its way in a hostile environment:

When [the pre-baptismal] rite of renunciation came into existence, its meaning was self-evident to the catechumen as well as to the entire Christian community. They lived within a pagan world whose life was permeated with the *pompa diaboli*, i.e. the worship of idols, participation in the cult of the Emperor, adoration of matter, etc. He not only knew what he was renouncing; he was also fully aware to what a “narrow way,” to what a difficult life—truly “non-conformist” and radically opposed to the “way of life” of the people around him—this renunciation obliged him.¹⁷

The renunciation of Satan was not a renunciation of a mythological being but a rejection of an entire way of life rooted in self-deception, hubris, and arrogance, and in a “pride which has truly taken human life from God and made it into darkness, death and hell.”¹⁸ Indeed, the practice of exorcism in the early church was originally part of the preparation for baptism. The ritual of renouncing the devil and all his works continued into the medieval church and Protestantism, was part of early Anabaptism, and was continued by Anabaptist-Mennonites until recent times.

Jesus’ Baptism: Entry into Public Life

The political nature of baptism and the renunciation of the powers predates both the early church and the Anabaptists. The practice of baptism in the Jewish tradition was perhaps not so much an initiation into the faith¹⁹ as a means of marking people who looked with hope for the coming of God amidst a world of economic, social, and political dysfunction. In the words of Samuel Torvend, “To worship one god—the God of Abraham and Sarah,

¹⁷ Alexander Schmemmann, *Of Water and The Spirit: A Liturgical Study of Baptism* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1974), 28.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁹ Rites of initiation in the Jewish tradition were normally connected to circumcision or Bar/Bat Mitzvah. However, the ritual (purity) bath, Mikvah, in which new converts pass through the waters, carries with it baptismal imagery.

Moses and Miriam—was to question if not deny the ultimate power of the Roman emperor, a human who referred to himself as ‘Son of God,’ ‘Lord of lords,’ and ‘Saviour of the world.’²⁰ The story of Jesus’ birth recalls this social and political context, including the policies of Caesar, who subjugated people to ‘peace’ through the use of military violence.²¹ This was the hostile environment into which Jesus was born, where an emperor demanding ultimate loyalty slaughtered children in order to prevent any threat to his power. Baptism marked both Jews and Christians as following another vision of the world, and so was an act of resistance and renunciation.

Jesus’ baptism embodied the political nature of baptismal life. Jesus doesn’t baptize himself or announce that he is now ready to set up “the kingdom” and hence is fit for baptism, but rather comes to John for baptism. He receives baptism as a gift, and as he descends into the waters the waters of memory wash over him—memories of slavery and freedom from captivity, the Red Sea crossing, suffering and release, food and drink miraculously provided in the wilderness, a promised land of milk and honey, and an eternal covenant—all gifts from God.²² All testify to God’s love, fidelity, and presence to a suffering people. Jesus is “washed in the great hope for God’s coming to a people who ‘dwell in darkness and the shadow of death.’”²³ His baptism puts him in solidarity with a people. It is a testimony to hope and to faith in God’s fidelity and powerful presence amidst oppression and the hegemonic forces of an empire obsessed with control and the use of violence.

Undoubtedly, the story of Jesus’ baptism is more than that of an individual’s initiation into a community’s story or a rite of passage. Jesus was not baptized into a personal and spiritual relationship with God that was separate from the story of God’s faithfulness and the children of Israel. Following his baptism, the Spirit falls upon Jesus (the same Spirit that fell upon Israel’s prophets and leaders), anointing him, marking him, and empowering him for a public purpose. Baptism is indeed a political act. Like the children of Israel after crossing the Red Sea (Numbers 14) and the prophet

²⁰ Samuel Torvend, *Flowing Water, Uncommon Birth: Christian Baptism in a Post-Christian Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2011), 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 15.

Elijah (1 Kings) before him, Jesus enters into the wilderness for 40 days, the same duration as Moses' sojourn with God on the mountain (Exodus 24), and the destructive flood in Noah's day after which a new creation emerges (Genesis 6-8). After his baptism, Jesus enters into the wilderness, a formative experience that shapes his identity, calling, and ministry.²⁴ From there he enters into public life, announcing that "the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near, repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15).

This account of Jesus' baptism should make it impossible for Christians to imagine baptism as existing apart from a political way of being in the world, or separate from economics, politics, peace and justice, or cut off from what it means to be embodied people in the world. Baptized people must recognize that the wilderness, suffering, and struggle are always nearby. One vivid means for expressing the political nature of Jesus' baptism and its proximity to suffering and struggle is Christian iconography. A classic icon within the Eastern Orthodox tradition depicts Jesus naked, up to his neck in water. On one side of the river, John the Baptist baptizes him, and on the other side three angels hold Jesus' clothes. The hand of God descends from above; underneath, deep within the river, lies a "river god" (or "river gods"). While a viewer's eye often focuses on the upper half of the icon (the baptism), it is what's beneath that is curious: the river god. Here Jesus' baptism is understood as a deep descent into chaos, emptiness, and darkness, and into death itself.

The Christian tradition has long connected Jesus' baptism to the book of Genesis and the creation story. For instance, Matthew's gospel begins with the word Genesis (γενέσεως, from γένεσις meaning "birth;" unfortunately, the NRSV uses "genealogy" here, which loses the connection between baptism and creation). John's gospel begins with "In the beginning . . ." which also recalls the story of creation and links it to the emerging ministry of Jesus. The key lies in the connection between Jesus' baptism and the water images of creation. In effect, God again addresses the watery chaos of creation in this baptism. Just as in creation something is brought out of chaos to birth, to life, Jesus descends into the watery chaos to drown and rises up into something new—a new birth, new life, and new hope. His baptism speaks again to God's creative power and ability to make something

²⁴ Ibid.

out of chaos, to create out of nothingness. What happens at Jesus' baptism happens again at his resurrection: at the point of death, nothingness, and chaos, the power of God is absolutely creative: it makes something new and raises him from the dead.

Baptism, then, symbolizes the power of God. Unlike the power of the empire that uses violence in order to control, God's power is expressed in vulnerability. In his baptism, as in his death on the cross, Jesus relinquishes his status and authority and descends naked. This is all to say that baptism not only points to a way of being in the world, a concern for peace, justice, wholeness, and hope, but actually sets one on the path to engaging the world.

Although baptism invites a relinquishment and a "dying," it is not of the deprecating kind that says, "I'm nothing and I'm worthless." Rather, it is a relinquishment that invites vulnerability, a letting-go of control, and of saying yes to God's creative power. Whenever baptism is misunderstood as a mechanism of control (whether by the church or the individual being baptized), we should become suspicious. Baptism is not about controlling who is in and who is out, nor is it a reward for good behavior.

What is striking about Jesus' baptism and its iconographic depictions is its conspicuous relation to wilderness, desert, emptiness, and chaos; that is, its theological, spiritual, and ethical proximity to disorder. Baptism is not an invitation to flee the world and its chaos and to protect ourselves by hunkering down and focusing on our life together in Anabaptist communities. If Jesus' baptism is taken seriously in imagining our baptismal life, then we should be suspicious of anything that distances us from the chaos. Our birth in baptism, says Rowan Williams, is "a reminder that chaos is not resolved or organized by fear, by a word from a divine distance, but organized, shaped given (even) beauty, by the involvement of God. . . . The baptized, I'm suggesting, are those who live in the name of God in the neighbourhood of chaos: and that may be an inner as well as an outer chaos."²⁵ This is not to suggest that baptized folk lead chaotic lives, but rather to say that our baptismal calling is lived out in vulnerable proximity to the struggle, oppression, pain, and suffering of the world. We are not the ones to give order to the chaos; on the contrary, we are

²⁵ Rowan Williams, "Living Baptismally." Lecture delivered at Trinity College, University of Melbourne (May 14, 2002). <https://www.trinity.unimelb.edu.au/getmedia/b1ef15dc-6fdc-4212-81ed-c699ca1dd1f9/TrinityPaper32.aspx>.

to witness to the character, fidelity, and inexhaustible love and compassion of God.

Furthermore, the baptismal imagination imagines a way of living alongside suffering and chaos without fear, including the fear of death. Theologian Stanley Hauerwas was once asked to give a pacifist response to the events of 9-11 (September 11, 2001). He pushed back on the assumption that American Christians should have a particular response because they were both “Christian” and “American.” He was keen to distinguish the two identities:

The “we” that distinguishes Christians from Americans . . . moreover, has everything to do with death. Christians are a community shaped by the practice of Baptism that reminds us there are far worse things that can happen to us than dying. The identification of the Christian “we” with the American “we” is an indication that the Christian “we” of Baptism has been submerged in the American fear of death. The willingness of those that flew the planes into the World Trade Center to die seems incomprehensible to us. It is almost as if the desperation that drove them to these terrible acts is a parody of our unwillingness to die.²⁶

Our baptismal calling imagines that we need not fear even death as we draw close to the chaos.

Waters That Kill Us: The Political Nature of the Church

This essay has focused on the political nature of baptism by means of a symbolic reading of it as drowning and death. While this symbolic interpretation has deep implications for what it means to be the church, the Body of Christ, and a political community, this subject is too broad to develop here. However, let me say that Paul’s use of drowning and death as the primary way of speaking about baptism is key to understanding what the church is to be. Amidst the conflict and tension of developing a community that included

²⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, “September 11: A Pacifist Response.” Remarks given at the University of Virginia, October 1, 2001. <http://web.archive.org/web/20050216040529/http://www.ekklesiaproject.org/resources/resource57/index.php?article=57>, accessed January 14, 2019.

Jews and Gentiles, he wrote this: “If anyone is united to Christ, there is a new world; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” (2 Corinthians 5:17, NEB). In Christ, there is a new creation in which inherited social definitions are no longer basic. In baptism, the believer “dies” to those definitions and rises to a new one. Baptism is the entry into a new people, a new creation, a new world, and a new way of imagining relationships. For the early church it was the members’ distinguishing mark that transcended previous definitions, such as those separating Jews and Gentiles. Baptism marks a new kind of social relationship, a unified, reconciled community in Christ that overarches differences (Jew/Gentile, male/female, slave/free, and so on).²⁷ The church itself is a new *polis*, a new political community.

Ours may be the first time in church history that people self-identify as Christians without being baptized. To return to the concern I noted at the outset: What happens when the church loses touch with such a significant Christian practice? While I come to this question first as a theologian and ministry practitioner, I also pay attention to what anthropologists say about such practices. For example, anthropologist Mary Douglas argues that when members of a religious group lose sight of their rituals’ origins and question their relevance, they create the conditions for the group’s possible demise. Douglas traces the stages of ritual disenchantment, with the final stage representing adaptation to the larger society.²⁸ As we have seen, rituals and symbols demarcate a minority community by providing a clear vision of its identity, thereby distinguishing it from the symbols and rituals of the dominant culture. The church’s rituals tell a story about what Christians believe about faith and the meaning of life, even if not all members are fully aware that they are doing so. Symbols and rituals have always been critical in helping Christians maintain their identity as followers of Jesus; baptism is no exception, and must not become one.

Members of the Believers’ Church tradition have been prone to think that baptism is something that happens in a single moment of time—an event—rather than as the passage into a way of life or a pattern of formation that includes practices of peace and justice. The symbolic practice of baptism

²⁷ See Yoder, *Body Politics*, and “Sacrament as Social Process: Christ the Transformer of Culture,” *Theology Today* 48, no. 1 (1991): 33-44.

²⁸ See Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1979).

reminds us that the baptismal waters are really a way of being in the world. As the early church understood, baptism sets out a way of life, presents a world of imagery, and fuels the Christian imagination. When we narrate the practice and contemplate the waters we share when joining the whole body of Christ, we are immersed in an ocean of meaning. Baptism can become a source of strength for our formation and our continuing discipleship; it is a vocation that we share as Christians.²⁹

As I indicated earlier, I fear that our baptismal imagination is sluggish and needs reinvigoration and animation. What would it mean if we were to develop a better baptismal ecology within Believers' Church communities, not just regarding the rite of baptism but throughout the life of the church? In attempting to be inclusive and perhaps in trying not to offend those who are unbaptized, we have minimalized the significance of this practice. I confess that I envy churches, Catholic, Protestant, and congregations within our own tradition that maintain a baptismal font in every worship service as an ongoing reminder of our commitment and vocation. While we Anabaptists frequently possess symbolic reminders of the Lord's Supper, thanks to the presence of Communion tables, sadly we have few symbolic reminders of baptism. We need both robust practices of baptism and a much stronger ecology of baptism, not only to accompany our practices but to live out our calling more faithfully.³⁰

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²⁹ De Waal, *Seeking Life*, 5-8.

³⁰ This essay is adapted from the author's Bechtel Lecture given at Conrad Grebel University College in February 2019.