



Sacramental Piety: Reinforced by Worship Elements

By Nathan Strutz

When my parents moved from the house where I grew up, they had a box of stuff for each of my siblings and myself. Some memories, like a little Packer sweater. Some junk. But at the bottom of this box, dusty and rusty and buried, was a plaque. It had a small child praying, with a short prayer and then, engraved in the center: "Nathan Baptized 5-23-71." How sad that this wonderful reminder of my baptism had been dusty and rusty and buried at the bottom of a box for many years. And truth be told, what I had literally done with that plaque, I had spiritually done with my baptism. I had buried it, let it get dusty and rusty and largely forgotten about in my daily life and even in my preaching and teaching as a pastor. I took that plaque and placed it on my desk, right next to my computer, where it still stands every day to remind me of my baptism, my special status as a child of God. If you are or were anything like me and had allowed your baptism to get dusty and rusty, or even if not, we pray this article will help you capture or recapture better sacramental piety, as reinforced by various worship elements. We will focus on preaching, teaching, and church architecture.

First of all, allow me to say that I have observed a growing sacramental piety among us. The fact that this article was requested is evidence. If I had rediscovered that baptismal plaque ten years earlier, I might have left it at the bottom of the box. But the instruction and encouragement I received from fellow pastors, conferences, and presentations helped me better appreciate my own baptism. National worship conference presentations have focused on sacramental piety. I have had the privilege to serve with a dozen vicars. They have taught me the importance of including the sacraments as the great comfort and power they are in preaching and teaching. Certainly all of us can continue to grow in our appreciation and love, but I thank God that, at least in my observation, we are already doing so.

Since nothing attracts people to the Church like good preaching, let's start there. If you are reading this as a preacher, consider using Baptism or the Lord's Supper as the key focus in specific gospel in your sermons. Using the sacraments as the specific

gospel in the sermon is a great way to provide variety in preaching. It is a great way to help all members remember their baptisms. Guests may be baptized, and the emphasis you give to that in preaching could remind them of the precious gift they have received and may have neglected. Baptism is also a great way to help children connect to the gospel. Like my plaque, we often think of children in connection with Baptism. Many, if not nearly all who are reading this article, were given the gift of Baptism when we were too young to remember the act. The section of a sermon on Baptism may be the one section children remember the best. It may be a part of the sermon that parents can really reinforce on the drive home. Don't save baptism references for Sundays when there is a baptism or the Baptism of our Lord.

In the same way, don't leave Communion to be a once-a-year empowerment on Maundy Thursday. Incorporate the sacraments as personalized forgiveness. Show the power of the sacraments for daily Christian living, for both children and adults. Also, don't be afraid to use just one sacrament and let that stand on its own. I have heard sermons where Baptism was beautifully used as specific gospel and power and then Holy Communion was referenced for the same purpose. I could tell it was coming. It felt redundant and tacked on. Use variety. Keep it fresh. Spotlighting the sacraments, maybe one a time, can really help you personalize Christ's love and forgiveness and increase the sacramental piety among God's people.

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It was my first pastor's conference. In the morning paper, the presenter wrote, "We need to teach our children to say, 'I don't pick on other children on the playground, because I'm baptized.'" I had never heard such a radical idea. As he explained it, I saw the light. That's exactly what Baptism means. I don't pick on kids on the playground. I'm buried with Christ. I have put on Christ. I'm living a new life.

"I don't pick on other children on the playground, because I'm baptized."

At a youth retreat, I shared a similar comment, something like, "I won't bully other kids because I'm baptized." I got strange looks. Several of the teens said, "I would never say that." I could relate. I had been there, in a place where I would never connect my baptism so directly with Christian living. There is much we can do to increase sacramental piety, not only in preaching, but also in teaching. While the focus of this article is on increasing sacramental piety by various worship elements, the way we teach and talk about Baptism will have a big influence on how worship can reinforce previous teaching and make us long for more.

How do you talk about Baptism? Do you usually say, "I was baptized"? Is it more common to hear, "I am baptized?" Do we talk about the day, "I was baptized," or, "the day of my baptism"? Teaching Baptism as a present tense, ongoing power will go a long way. In teaching Bible Information Class or Catechism class, I pull out my plaque and share my sad story. Many can relate. But during and after that lesson, the Spirit is working to change the heart and attitude. The Spirit continues working through the Word to increase sacramental piety.

What about other avenues of teaching? When couples are expecting a child, I speak with them about having their child baptized in the hospital (original sin is always an emergency) and then consider having the large, joyous family celebration (a wonderful thing) at a later date after parents are a little more settled and family can make the trip. Isn't there also something cool about being able to remind our children, "You were born and reborn on the same day. We celebrate your birthday and your rebirthday at the same time"? Could a baptism on the day of birth better help children and parents remember the day of baptism?

Could Baptized in Water be the opening hymn on a Sunday without a baptism?

What about teaching opportunities within worship itself? This is probably where you can touch the most people. In my youth, the only baptism hymn I can remember singing (I know it's dangerous

to rely on the memory of a child in church) was *Dearest Jesus We Are Here*. It was sung only when a baptism was taking place. Many baptism hymns focus on the event of baptism and assume it's a child being baptized. There's nothing wrong with that. But has that sent the impression that Baptism is like Trix cereal, it's just for kids? *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* has many more baptismal hymns that teach Baptism's power for all ages. The *Christian Worship Supplement* has even more. Could *Baptized in Water* (CW 297) be the opening hymn on a Sunday without a baptism? Could *God's Own Child, I Gladly Say It* (CWS 737) be used as a hymn of the day and sung with as much gusto by adults as by children? Could one of these hymns be sung during the distribution of the Lord's Supper to tie the two sacraments together? What about the *Gathering Rite on Holy Baptism* found in CWS? It makes a great service opening on the Baptism of our Lord. Why not use it on other Sundays as well, again, even when there is not a baptism?

Here's another idea you might consider adding to the toolbox. At the congregation I serve, we have one special service that explains the liturgy every other year. This covers the Scripture references to the canticles, the biblical basis for the various parts of the liturgy and a very short sermon. We also have a service every other year explaining the symbolism of our worship space. I receive more positive comments on these two services than any other, including Christmas and Easter. Now we are very blessed to have a relatively new facility, and much thought was given by the previous pastor and the building committee and architect on the teaching and preaching the building would do.¹ Maybe you can't change the architecture of your worship space. But maybe there are some



things you can do to help increase focus on the sacraments with the architecture and facility God has given you.

Let's start with the font. Where is your font? Can it easily be found? How big is it? It seems like the "traditional" place for the font was off to the side, tucked away in a corner, barely visible. Even in some cases it was stored away and only taken out when there was an actual baptism. What a shame! Baptism is probably the biggest spiritual event of your life, next to the Holy Spirit bringing you to faith! Let people see the font. Preach and teach so much about Baptism that God's people will be begging to see the font and be reminded every time they enter God's house, "I am God's child. My sins are washed away." Could the font go right at the entrance to the sanctuary? Don't allow people to say the font is at, "The back of the church," as though the font (and therefore Baptism) is in the least significant place in God's house. Tell people and train them to say, "The font is at the entrance to the sanctuary. The font reminds us all how God declared us his children and brought us into his family." Why not let children stand at the font when they enter? Let them linger there a little bit. Ask them, "What is this? What happens here?" Maybe all of us could benefit from a little more time spent at the font in a visible location.

At the congregation where I have the privilege to serve, the font is not only right at the entrance, there is a stained-glass window of the Baptism of our Lord in the same sight line. When you see the font, you see the window. You see them both from the entryway, so even before you enter God's house, you are reminded of Baptism. We are blessed to have a triptych as well. One of the panels we use for the Pentecost season shows a dove in the background and visible water as a reminder of the Spirit's working

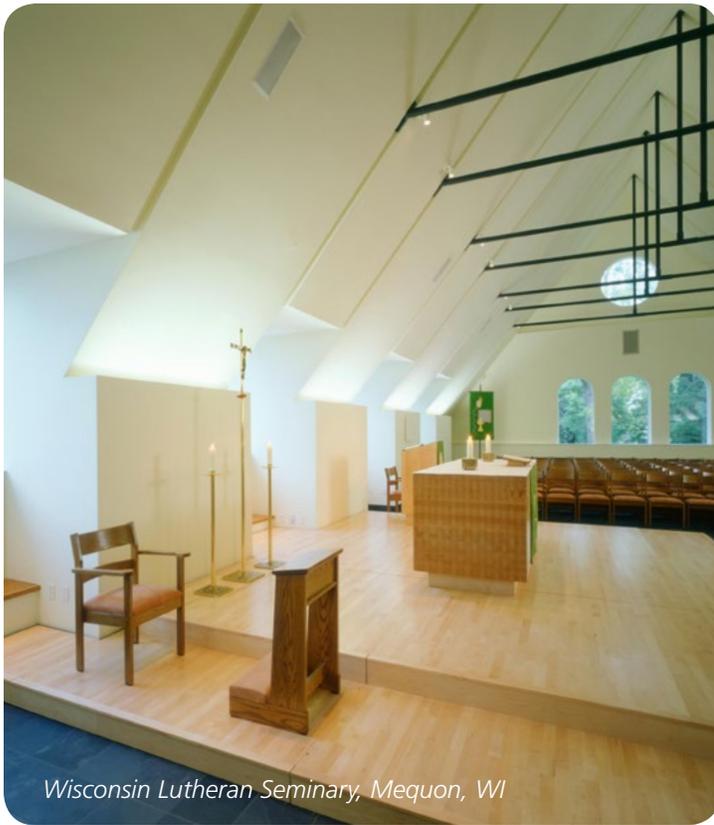


in bringing 3000 to be baptized that day. Maybe there are other elements of your architecture that can reinforce Baptism.²

We also have a moveable font, so it can be located up front for baptisms and other special Sundays of baptismal remembrance. Just the moving around of the font can redraw attention to it. When we place the font front and center on the Baptism of our Lord, people always ask, "Who's getting baptized today?" I think it is kind of cool to tell them, "Jesus." Now, I would never argue with someone who has a rock solid, immovable font to show that God's covenant of love will never be removed from us and his forgiveness he applied in Baptism is rock solid. That font certainly has benefits that a smaller, movable font does not. But if you have a movable font, consider moving it to help draw attention to Baptism again. Or you could do what was done at a congregation I previously served. There we had a four foot high, three foot wide font, made of stone around a wood frame, with concrete and river rock forming the basin. But the font was on wheels. It took three men to move it, but it could be moved. Best of both worlds?

What about your altar? What does it symbolize? How prominent is it in the worship space? The altar is the visual symbol of God's presence and the place of celebration of the Lord's Supper. I'm thankful that our previous pastor educated people about the altar's purpose and symbolism. This allows the altar to stand out and serve this main goal. We have a clear understanding that nothing will be placed on our altar except two candles and the elements for the Lord's Supper. Nothing else is ever placed on the altar. No books. No plants. No paraments. We do this to allow Christ's body and blood to occupy a prominent place. The elements are clearly seen. Very visible. They are not lost amidst





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many other things on the altar. The bread and wine are set apart and reserved for this special place. I understand that removing flowers from an altar where they have always stood is not the wisest choice in every location. But think of what you can do to allow Christ's body and blood to occupy the most prominent place on the altar.

What about the frequency with which you celebrate the Lord's Supper? Will that help God's people to better appreciate the Sacrament? I realize there is no rule set in the Scriptures. I understand the practical and logistical concerns each time the Lord's Supper is celebrated. I also have served in the heart of ELCA country and in religiously liberal communities where even the few Missouri Synod churches around do not practice close communion. So I have had the close communion conversations and had to wrestle with those issues. But one thing that always sticks with me is how many times I have heard this question in Bible Information Class, when teaching about the Lord's Supper. "If it's so great, why don't you have it every Sunday?" No matter how many times I hear that question, I can't say I have a real good answer. Now, to be fair, we do not celebrate every Sunday. We have the Lord's Supper every Sunday of the month except the first Sunday. We also don't celebrate the Lord's Supper for our Easter festival service or on Christmas Eve when we expect many guests. You will have to find the proper balance in your own location.

In conclusion, we thank God that more of our congregations are celebrating the Lord's Supper more frequently. We thank God that

more churches have more prominent fonts that draw attention to the wonder of Baptism. We thank God that sacramental piety does seem to be increasing among us. I pray this article will help you consider a few worship elements of preaching, teaching, and church architecture that help deepen that piety even further.

- ¹ For a description of this church see *Worship the Lord* #22, 11-2006, by Doug Tomhave and the supplemental online content at connect.wels.net/worship. Several articles in WTL's church architecture series provide ideas for reinforcing sacramental piety.
- ² The photos on pages 2-3 are from Resurrection, Verona, WI.



Why the font?

The chapel in the new (2013) WELS Center for Mission and Ministry has a font. President Mark Schroeder wrote about this in the September 2013 issue of Forward in

Christ. Here are some excerpts:



When first-time visitors enter the chapel, we anticipate that one question will be asked more than any other: "Why is there a baptismal font here?" After all, one could safely assume that actual baptisms

will be done rarely, if ever, in the chapel....

That font will not just be a reminder of something that happened in the past. Martin Luther said that the entire life of a Christian is to be one of repentance. Every day is a day when repentant Christians confess their sins, drown the old Adam, and leave the sinful way of life behind....

The font in the chapel will remind worshipers and visitors of the new life that God has called them to live and the power that he gives to live that new life....

The font will also be a daily, visible reminder of the constant and continuing grace of God. When we see it, we are reminded that God's grace is new to us every morning.

Full article: www.wels.net/news-events/forward-in-christ/september-2013/why-font