

Perspectives on Church Music 7

Carl Schalk

BAPTISM AND SMALL POTATOES

Paraphrasing Garrison Keillor, that doyen of Mid-West common sense:
“Christians, left to their own devices, tend to go straight for the small potatoes.”

“Small potatoes” pretty well describes a baptism I attended recently. It was done with as little “fuss” as possible. The rite was truncated, apparently to get it over with as quickly as possible. The baptismal font was off in a corner, its placement hardly reflecting the importance of baptism in the Christian community. Water was minimally dabbed or sprinkled, scarcely signing the “drowned and die” motif of baptism. The people—children or adults—had virtually no active part. Instead, they watched the pastor “do something up there.”

The operating principle seemed to be: “How little can we do and still have a baptism?”

We went for the “small potatoes.”

Baptism, we believe, brings forgiveness of sin, life, and salvation, and is the entrance rite into the kingdom of the promise. Luke reminds us that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” That repentance was necessarily followed by Christian baptism. Do

minimalist celebrations of baptism reflect the greatness of heaven's joy? What do such perfunctory celebrations say to our children about its importance in their lives?

The full baptismal rite as celebrated by most Lutherans (other traditions have a similar, though not identical rite) consists of an entrance hymn and the gathering of the baptismal party at the chancel, the invocation in the name of the Trinity, receiving the sign of the cross, the Gospel reading, the address to the sponsors, and prayer. Moving to the font, those to be baptized renounce the devil and—together with the entire congregation—confess their new-found faith. They are then washed in the baptismal water and receive the Holy Spirit in the laying on of hands. The newly-baptized put on a white garment and are presented with the baptismal candle with the injunction to “Live always by the light of Christ.” Returning to the altar, prayers are spoken for the one baptized and for their parents, and for all the baptized. The baptismal rite concludes with the announcement of the newly baptized as a member of the Christian community and the welcome by the congregation led by a representative of the community. It is a full, rich rite involving the entire congregation. No “small potatoes” here.

What can be done to restore a fuller celebration of Holy Baptism? For starters, pastors, worship leaders, and congregations might well begin by studying baptism itself and its importance as the great rite of entrance into the Christian community. Such study would include the role of the catechumenate and proper preparation for baptism, the inner dynamics and movement of the rite itself, and the full involvement of the baptismal party, the various leaders in worship, and the entire congregation in the rite. Last of all, we need

to take the necessary time in worship to open up to worshippers the riches of the full baptismal rite.

Let's not reflect heaven's "great joy" with a minimalist congregational rite led by worship leaders determined to "get it over with" as soon as possible. Baptism is, after all, a celebration of the whole Christian community, not something simply "done to those baptized."

Let's baptize with the full rite, with a font located to signify baptism's importance, with plenty of water, with all the prayers, with all the singing, with all the "fuss" that the joy and celebration of baptism deserves.

We've settled for the "small potatoes" in baptism long enough. Our congregations and our children deserve much more!

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