Historic Rural Churches

SHALL WE GATHER AT THE RIVER?

By Clayton H. Ramsey

In the region that Flannery O'Connor described as a "Christ-haunted South," the image of the earnest preacher in shirtsleeves and waders, waist-deep in cloudy pond water, steadying a proselyte in laundered white gown, shivering in the bracing chill, silt oozing up through her bare toes, solemn witnesses thick on the shore in their Sunday finest, craning for a good look as she is plunged beneath the surface, emerging to a new life, the swimming hole or fishing spot transformed for an hour into a baptistery in the sanctuary of nature is as enduring a reflection of Deep South culture as fried chicken and yeast rolls in dinner on the grounds and the fiery sermons of itinerant evangelists in canvas tents. But this iconic portrait of Southern Protestantism did not emerge from the imagination of nineteenth-century clergymen. The practice is rooted deep in the ancient past.

The Greek word *baptizo* is the lexical kernel at the heart of the English word "baptism." Well before it was used to describe religious rites, it was familiar in pagan literature. In the medical instructions of Hippocrates and philosophical discussions of Plato, it meant "to immerse." In some manuscripts it meant "to suffer shipwreck, to drown, to perish." In others it was used to describe sinking into sleep or intoxication, even to be overwhelmed by "faults, desires, sicknesses, magical arts." It also had the sense of "to dip" in describing the practice of dyeing cloth. Later, the word was used to refer to ritual ablutions. In the Hellenistic religious world, while ubiquitous, these

COURTESY PEGGY STRICKLAND

Thirty-eight new members of Colbert Baptist Church in Madison County are baptized in the mill run at Bullocks Mill after revival services led by Rev. F.J. Hendrix, circa 1939.

purifications with water had "little cultic significance." It would not be so with the Semitic peoples and their descendants.[1]

The Judeo-Christian story begins with water at the very start of holy scripture: "the earth was formless and void, and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2) and would be utilized as a part of sacred rites in the history of relationship between God and humanity. There was something special about a ritual cleansing, washing off the stain of this world before an encounter with divinity, required of Aaron and his sons when they were set apart for the divine service of the Old Testament priesthood (Leviticus 8:5-7) and so important prior to acts of worship in Judaism that a bronze basin of water would be placed at the entrance to the tabernacle for ritual cleaning before entry. In later years both Jewish and Gentile proselytes would undergo baptism by immersion to produce ritual purity.

More than a century before the common era, a group of Jewish priests withdrew from what they saw as the corruption of the Second Temple in Jerusalem to follow an ascetic lifestyle in Qumran on the edge of the Dead Sea. They engaged in daily, ritual immersions in a communal bath as an expression of their repentance from transgressions. Although debated by scholars, in all likelihood the camel-hair clad, locust-and-wild-honey eating firebrand of judgment, John the Baptist, emerged from this community of Essenes that produced the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls. In his baptism of repentance that looked to the coming of the Messiah, we see the prologue to the story of Christian baptism.

John would baptize Jesus, an act that "would thus have been seen as a definite Messianic anointing, an event of genuine eschatological significance marking the beginning of the End."[2] Those who followed inherited a practice that would pictorialize a turning from a past life to accept a new one and identify believers with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. With this three-fold practice expressed in the submersion of the entire body of the convert in water, new believers would join the assembly of the faithful. So important was this rite that the last words of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, later known as the "Great Commission," included the charge, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).

As the apostles and their spiritual descendants fanned out across the known world, preaching the gospel of Christ, a message of repentance and faith, they took with them this act of water baptism and the forgiveness of sins, with the promise of the baptism of the Holy Spirit. In the *Didache*, the oldest presentation of Christian teaching outside of the New Testament, composed at the end of the first century, baptism is discussed in chapter seven: the words used in the rite, what to do if running, cold water is not available, when pouring over the head three times replaces immersion, the importance of preparatory fasting.[3] The Church Fathers over the next several centuries would fill out a doctrine of baptism, distinct from pagan, gnostic, and especially Jewish purification rituals. With the confession of faith in Jesus and repentance from sin, these early baptisms were likely experienced in the nude, with triple immersion, a laying on of hands, an anointing with oil, and a subsequent participation in the eucharist, the elements sometimes accompanied by milk and honey. Other aspects of the ceremony depended on the region in which the rite took place.[4]

As the contours of orthodoxy emerged in these patristic years, the importance of immersion baptism, both as ritual and symbol, was frequently affirmed. Before Emperor Theodosius I enacted the Edict of Thessalonica in 380 A.D., establishing Nicene Christianity as the state church of the Roman Empire, many baptisms were performed outdoors, in rivers and lakes, following the example of John the Baptist and the first followers of Jesus. But after the late-fourth century legalization of the sect, baptisteries as separate buildings to shelter baptismal fonts became more common. There is archaeological evidence of these fonts from as early as the 240s in the Syrian Dura Europos, but one of the earliest in Rome, the Lateran Baptistery, was commissioned by Constantine the Great in the third century and completed by Pope Sixtus III in 440 A.D. This class of ecclesiastical building expanded over the years to accommodate larger crowds of catechumens as the bishop would baptize those in an entire diocese only three times a year, at Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany, the doors sealed for the rest of the liturgical year, preventing private baptisms and ensuring the authority of the bishop by controlling who was baptized and when.

These baptisteries would serve a number of churches and were often octagonal, one more side than a perfect seven, reflecting the new beginning of a Christian life after baptism. Other features, like three steps into and three steps out of the pools, putting the font below floor level, and the shape of the basin had symbolic significance, representing "the tomb of death and resurrection and the womb of new birth."[5] This architecture confirms the assertion of one historian, reflecting the consensus: "The Christian literary sources, backed by secular word usage and Jewish religious immersions, give an overwhelming support for full immersion as the normal action."[6]

By the fifth and sixth centuries infant baptism was becoming more common, relying more on the efficacy of the act and moral authority of the Church as opposed to the confession of the believer. By the ninth century, few separate baptisteries were being built, clergy relying more on smaller fonts for affusion (pouring) and aspersion (sprinkling), the act long since moved indoors and away from the full-body experience of immersion. It would take until the sixteenth century, when the Anabaptists (literally, "re-baptizers") would emerge from the Radical Reformation to recover the practice of believer's baptism, requiring an adult confession.

While there is some contention over the relationship between the Anabaptists and the Baptists, the latter likewise returned to an immersion of converts and not infants. Fleeing to Amsterdam

from England in 1608 to escape King James's persecution of Puritan Separatists, John Smyth formed a congregation in a bakery of Mennonites, a Dutch Anabaptist sect, and within the year had baptized himself and reconstituted the assembly as the first Baptist church of baptized believers. When they united with the Waterlander Mennonite Church in Amsterdam several years later, one of them, Thomas Helwys, returned to England to publish the first Baptist Confession in 1611 and start the first Baptist church there, in Spitalfields, near London. Smyth would lead the Particular Baptists, those who believed Christ died only for the elect, and Helwys would shepherd the General Baptists, claiming He died for all humanity. Both would hold fast to their conviction that immersion of believers was the most biblical and ancient practice of baptism.

William Calvert and his wife were on the first transport with General Oglethorpe to the new colony of Georgia in 1733. They would be the first Baptists to arrive, while Rev. Nicholas Bedgegood, the first ordained Baptist minister in Georgia, would perform the first baptisms in the colony in 1765 among employees of George Whitefield's Orphan House.

On the frontier of the virgin territory, every immersion in the Georgia colony was conducted outdoors, in rivers, lakes, and ponds. As communities were established and Baptist churches constructed, many of the houses of worship were built close to these natural bodies of water.

Indoor options to conduct this aspect of their religious practice came slowly. The First Baptist Church in America, founded by Roger Williams in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1638, would not introduce indoor baptisms in their present sanctuary, built in 1774-5, until 1838, filling the reservoir by hand for more than twenty-five years before the introduction of a public water system in the city in 1864. In Georgia, the First Baptist Church of Savannah, established in 1800, was the first congregation in the state to have an indoor baptistery, likely under the pulpit platform, and the first believer to be baptized indoors that same year was a woman named Elizabeth Ladson Godfrey. Subsequent candidates were given a choice of whether to be baptized in the church sanctuary or outdoors in the Savannah River, either at Pooler's Wharf or Wayne's Wharf.[7] Their current building, erected in 1833, likewise had an indoor baptistery, accessed by lifting two trapdoors from the floor of the pulpit platform, and by 1898 the pool was heated.[8]

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But this church was not representative of most in the state. As Baptist churches spread through Georgia during the Second Great Awakening and the years that followed, so too did the reliance of most of them on outdoor resources for their baptisms. It was a connection with the New Testament Church, required no additional expense, and could accommodate a number of proselytes and spectators at once. For decades it was the preferable option and was performed year-round, neither mosquitoes nor ice a deterrent for the practice (although in the winter, the considerate deacons of one church would rise early, dam a spring to create a pool, then roll heated rocks into it to warm the water).[9]

There is surprisingly little archival reference in congregational histories and associational records that indicate the location and logistics of baptism, apart from numerical tallies. Presumably it was so common that it did not require explicit notation. But by the end of the nineteenth century, there was extensive photographic evidence of river baptisms in Georgia, iconic black-and-white images of hundreds of ceremonies in countless waterways across the state. On one hand the plethora of pictures was indeed an indication of the popularity of the practice and the increase in number of baptisms in the region. Baptist churches multiplied, requiring more baptisms, and other faith traditions that held to believer's baptism, including Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ), Seventh-day Adventists, and Pentecostals, among others, were being added to the religious landscape. The rise of fundamentalism, in reaction to the developments of modernism, prompted some quarters to call for a return to the primitive church of the first century, which, of course, included immersion baptism.

One strain of Baptists, adhering to Landmark or "Baptist bride" theology, even argued that there was a "Trail of Blood" of unbroken continuity between John the Baptist and the current Baptist church, which they unsurprisingly deemed the only "true" church. (The Southern Baptist Convention issued a formal disapproval of the movement in 1859.) The Long Depression, running from the Panic of 1873 to the end of the Panic of 1893 in 1896, made expensive projects like installing and maintaining indoor baptismal facilities cost prohibitive for many. Religious, social, and economic factors all contributed to the persistence of the practice of outdoor baptism, especially in the more rural South and Midwest.

The practice of outdoor baptisms persisted into the twentieth century, but trends in urbanization and industrialization at the end of the nineteenth century affected the extent and frequency of the experience. With the growth of cities and the accumulation of wealth in urban centers, the means to include indoor baptistries in increasingly ornate sanctuaries were more available, particularly as distance between intown churches and rural

bodies of water increased, and the sanitation of natural features in the city were compromised with pollution. Standardization of pipe sizes, improvement of sewer and water treatment facilities, and the ability to deliver more sophisticated indoor plumbing systems were advancements that made modern baptisteries more appealing and available to faith communities in the city.[10] As expected, rural churches lagged behind their urban co-religionists and baptized outdoors longer than those with the ability to install indoor facilities.

Between the entirely natural setting of outdoor bodies of water and the artifice of indoor facilities was an intermediate structure of an outdoor pool, usually spring-fed, dug near the church building and large enough to accommodate an officiant and proselyte but little else. Lined by brick and concrete, some are still used, while others have been reclaimed by nature and forgotten under detritus. Kiokee Baptist Church, the earliest continuing Baptist congregation in the state, has both: an outdoor baptistry next to their historic church building, constructed in 1808 and used on "Kiokee History Day" to baptize new members, and an indoor baptistry in their most recent sanctuary, built in 1995.

In 2002, Robert Gardner, then Mercer's Senior Researcher in Baptist History, identified three outdoor baptistries still in use in Pickens County, another near Sandersville, possibly three in Wilkes County, Kiokee's in Appling, and one more, for a total of nine in three counties.[11] Arlette Copeland, at one time Special Collections Assistant at Mercer, pointed to one in Troup County and another in Warren County.[12] While these scattered sites are operational, there are others, like the one built in 1828 at Mount Gilead Baptist Church in Clay County, that have only recently been rediscovered and returned to service, the 600-gallon capacity, nine-by-five-by-four foot pool filled by a water hose stretched across the road from the church.[13] Nine years later, Ms. Copeland added another outdoor baptistry, this one in Twiggs County, to the short list, but confessed to her correspondent, "We…sadly, have no other information on outdoor baptisms in Georgia current or past."[14]

Given that Mercer is the primary repository of Georgia Baptist history, such an admission indicates that there is indeed a dearth of information about outdoor baptisms in the state, confirmed by current archivists. Scouring records may serendipitously reveal the existence of other outdoor baptistries in Georgia, but they are admittedly rare.

As with every other facet of society during the fraught years of Jim Crow, race was a factor in how baptism was practiced. When segregation was applied to churches and congregations split along racial lines, baptismal waters were likewise separate, much like public pools and water fountains, supporting white authority and institutionalizing black subordination. Rectifying this discrimination has taken decades, and there is still more to do.

The ancient ritual of outdoor baptism has never really disappeared, and there has even been some recent return to nature out of a sense of novelty and nostalgia, especially as a culmination of camp meetings, revivals, and youth camps. Despite all the changes to baptism, Annette Newberry, associate professor of church history at Assemblies of God Theological Seminary in Springfield, Missouri, points out the most important aspect is its spiritual significance, not its historical variety. "It's not where or how but the symbolism involved in it, the outward sign of an inward work," she says, a salient reminder for anyone who wades into the deep waters of this most profound and ancient practice.[15]

Endnotes

1. Gerhard Kittel, ed. *"Bapto, baptizo, baptismos, baptisma, baptistes," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Volume I* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1964), 529-535.

2. "Baptism—The Historical Background," 29. https://theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/howard_nt-baptism/02.pdf, accessed July 19, 2024.

3. "The *Didache* (c. 80-90)," EWTN: Global Catholic Network, II.7, https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/didache-12503, accessed July 25, 2024.

4. Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology, and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 855-856.

5. Ferguson, *Baptism*, 819-820.

6. Ferguson, *Baptism*, 857.

7. George H. Shriver, *Pilgrims Through the Years: A Bicentennial History of First Baptist Church, Savannah, Georgia* (Franklin, TN: Providence House Publishers, 1999), 70.

8. Shriver, *Pilgrims*, 71.

9. Quoted in Robert G. Gardner, et al., *A History of the Georgia Baptist Association, 1784-1984* (Atlanta, GA: Georgia Baptist Historical Society, 1988), 27. From Frances W. Reid and Mary B. Warren, eds., *Mars Hill Baptist Church* (Athens, GA: Heritage Papers, 1966), p. iii.

10. "When Did Indoor Plumbing Become Common?" *Plumbing Around the Clock*, June 6, 2024. https://plumbingaroundtheclock.com/blog/when-did-indoor-plumbing-become-common/, accessed July 22, 2024.

11. From an email from Robert Gardner to Carolyn Gleaton, May 30, 2002. "Baptistries" file, Archives, Special Collections, and Digital Initiatives, Jack Tarver Library, Mercer University.

12. From a letter from Arlette Copeland to Carolyn Gleaton, June 11, 2002. "Baptistries" file, Mercer Archives.

13. Joe Westbury, "Mount Gilead Baptist Church," *The Christian Index*, October 10, 2002. "Baptistries" file, Mercer Archives.

14. From email from Arlette Copeland to Caroline Davis, January 19, 2011. "Baptistries" file, Mercer Archives.

15. Christie Storm, "Where there is water," *Arkansas Democrat Gazette*, August 4, 2012. https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2012/aug/04/where-there-water-20120804/, accessed July 24, 2024.