# What does Christian baptism have to do with the current controversy in the church about sexuality and ordination?

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To see how the theology of Christian baptism speaks to a contemporary issue like sexuality and ordination, we must first understand baptism itself, and to do that is to grapple with the symbols of water and fire. Whether in a font, a pool, or a river, water is the central symbol of baptism, just as bread and wine are the central symbols of the Lord's Supper. But to the symbol of water, Jesus added the symbol of fire. John the Baptist said that his baptism was of water, but that Jesus would baptize with "the Holy Spirit and fire" (Matthew 3:11).

Water and fire. What do these two basic symbols mean? They point to the deep truth that baptism means not one thing, but many things. Water is the fluid that surrounds us in the womb, water makes an oasis of life in the desert, water slakes our thirst in a parched land, and water washes us clean. So it is with the water of baptism. Baptism is about birth, and to be baptized is to signify that we are "born again," that we have become a new creation in Christ. The life-giving water of baptism is a living spring in the midst of the wilderness, and to be baptized is to be brought into the place of true life in Jesus Christ. "Give me this water," said the Samaritan woman to Jesus, "that I may never be thirsty…" (John 4:15). Baptism is also about being washed clean in the pure water of God's mercy, and to be baptized is a sign that by the grace of God we are forgiven, cleansed of our sins, and called into the fellowship of the redeemed. As one of the Presbyterian confessions, the Second Helvetic, beautifully states it, "We are baptized with water…washed or sprinkled with visible water. For the water washes dirt away, and cools and refreshes hot and tired bodies. And the grace of God performs these things for souls, and does so invisibly or spiritually" (*Book of Confessions* 5.188).

*From the book*

Freqently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

Christian baptism is not only about water, though; it is also about fire, which means that it is about the power of the Holy Spirit to bring energy, power, warmth, and light to our lives. It is the Holy Spirit who stirs up the love of God, burning in our hearts. It is the Holy Spirit who fills us with fiery passion for the gospel, it is the Holy Spirit who causes good gifts to flame up in our lives, and it is the Holy Spirit who lights up the way of Christ and beckons us to follow. When Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended like a dove upon him, and the voice of God announced that Jesus was "my Son, the beloved." Our baptism is a sign that the same Spirit falls upon us, declaring us to be the beloved daughters and sons of God. "Baptism signifies…being sealed by God's Spirit," states the *Presbyterian Book of Order* (W-2.3004), a statement that draws upon the language of Ephesians: "When you heard the gospel of your salvation…you were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:13-14). To understand baptism is not only to think about water, but also to think about fire.

Putting together the meanings we discern in these two symbols, water and fire, we see two important insights about the relationship between baptism and the debate about ordination. First, the pure water of baptism reminds us that this sacrament is about God's purity and not ours, God's grace and not our righteousness, that it is about something that God does toward, for and with us, to which our Christian lives are a response. As Calvin insisted, "Christ's purity has been offered us in [baptism]; his purity ever flourishes; it is defiled by no spots but buries and cleanses away all our defilements." This means that all baptized Christians stand on the same moral ground, namely the righteousness of God. We are, as the old hymn puts it, "standing on the promises of Christ" and not on our own good works.

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We are able, then, to see every baptized person as a treasure, as one who has been claimed by the mercy of Christ, and as one whose flourishing and whose full participation in the church is our duty and delight. We are called to help each other grow into our baptismal identity, to help each other along the way of discipleship and obedience as fellow pilgrims who have been graced by light along the path, to find together as brothers and sisters how to allow our lives to conform more and more to the way of Jesus Christ. Any talk in the church of who belongs and who doesn't, of who is in the circle and who is out of the circle, of

who is morally pure and who is impure, is not mere political incorrectness. It is instead a denial of the deep truth of baptism, a denial of the promise of God to Israel and to the church: "I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you…" (Isaiah 43:1-2).

Perhaps even more pointedly, the symbol of fire and the promise of the Holy Spirit remind us that the sacrament of baptism is itself an ordination service. All baptized people are already ordained. Through baptism, God creates a new community, a priesthood of all believers, a nation of ordained ministers. In the words of 1 Peter (a letter that many scholars think contains portions of an early baptismal sermon), "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet 2:9).

It is well known that in the worship of the early church, those who were not baptized were dismissed before the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. When they were eventually baptized, they would then be welcomed to the feast of the faithful. But it is less well known that, as Presbyterian church historian Catherine Gunsalus González notes, the non-baptized were dismissed not only before the Lord's Supper but also before the prayers of the people. Praying this prayer, she says, was considered to be a priestly act, and "baptism gave a priestly role in intercession that has been lost" (*Reformed Liturgy and Music,* Winter, 1994, 5). In other words, the early church knew that baptism was not only an act of initiation into the church; it was also an act of ordination into priestly ministry.

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The issue before the church is not whether persons of this or that sexual orientation can be ordained to ministry. They are already ordained to ministry by virtue of baptism. As is the case with ministers of the Word, elders, and deacon, all baptized Christians have had hands laid upon their heads as a sign that they are set apart as ministers of Christ and as a sign of the presence, power, and blessing of the Holy Spirit. That same Spirit has given to the baptized all the gifts and graces the church needs to sustain its life and engage in its mission, and the whole church is called to be good stewards of these charisms and gifts.

So the real question that baptism places before us is not who shall be ordained. That one has already been decided at the font. The real question is one of the stewardship of gifts. If the Holy Spirit gives to this one among us the gift of

teaching, and to another among us the gift of preaching, and to still others the gifts of discernment, leadership, and care, who are we to turn these spiritual gifts away? What we are truly summoned to decide is not who among the baptized receives these spiritual gifts or who is entitled to exercise them. The Holy Spirit decides that. We are summoned, rather, to receive these gifts with joy and gratitude and to be the kind of church that orders its life in such a way that these gifts are honored, exercised, and nourished to the glory of God and the blessing of the world.

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