Claimed as Christ’s Own
Baptized into Missionary Discipleship

George R. Hunsberger

In baptism, we are claimed by Christ to be joined to his own mission in the world. Several biblical portraits of baptism open up the daily meaning of baptism and underscore that our baptism means we are both called and sent by God.

The powerful scene near the end of The Godfather, Part 1 (1972) is not easily forgotten. Following his father’s death, and taking on his mantle as head of the Corleone crime family, Michael Corleone has put in motion a series of executions set to occur at the very moments he will be standing as godfather at the baptism of his sister’s son, Michael Rizzi. Back and forth the images flash, crashing against each other: the baptismal liturgy, and one by one the massacre of the heads of the rival families that have formed an alliance against the Corleones.

The images are deeply disturbing. They crash against all our sensibilities and leave us with questions about what the bold affirmations of parents and godparents and congregations and priests can possibly mean. Do the human contradictions disallow what the church claims for the rite? Do they nullify any confidence that God has acted in the rite to seal the grace of God, to wash the baptized clean and grant new birth, and to join the baptized in union with Christ forever? Or, on the other hand, is it possible that these images, by their bitter and shocking contrast, serve rather to highlight how compelling and gripping baptism really is, rightly understood?

George Hunsberger is professor of theology and director of the “Journey” Institute at Western Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Mich. Ordained in the Presbyterian Church (USA), he holds a doctorate in theology from Princeton Theological Seminary, is the author of a book on Lesslie Newbigin’s missionary ecclesiology, and is the editor of The Church between Gospel and Culture: The Emerging Mission in North America.
Such questions are not easy to sort out, and we won’t attempt to resolve them all here. What we can do is allow such questions to invite our attention to the seriousness of what is claimed in baptism. We can allow ourselves again to sense just how fully God, in baptism, pledges love and healing toward us and welcomes our own pledge of loyalty and affection in grateful response. And perhaps, sobered by the haunting images from _The Godfather_, we can appreciate how in our baptism we are both called to be Christ’s disciples and sent to bear the Holy Spirit’s witness to Christ.

**Sealed and Marked**

The Holy Spirit has marked us with the seal of Christ”: so says the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) 1274. In baptism, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ’s own for ever,” as some liturgies put it. The Roman Catholic Rite of Baptism opens this way:

> My dear children, the Christian community welcomes you with great joy. In its name I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of his cross. I now trace the cross on your foreheads, and invite your parents and godparents to do the same.

(no. 41)

There are many moments in the worship life of the church when an infant or adult is baptized and words like these are spoken. These are grand moments of entrance—into Christ, into the community called the body of Christ. The rest of us assembled around the font remember that we were once baptized as well. We also have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and claimed for Christ our Savior. We also have been marked with the sign of his cross!

Many of us, perhaps most of us, were baptized when we were very young infants. We remember stories we have been told about the time of our baptism, and we have seen what the family photographs show us about it. Perhaps it was in our youth or at a point in the beginnings of our faith in Christ when we knew little of its significance. As we try to remember—to feel ourselves in the experience we now witness in someone else—we may even feel so removed from our own past baptism that it seems remote to anything in our present life. We feel separated from it.

But our baptism in the past is not intended to be located only in distant memory. Rather, the reminders and memories enliven a sense that something baptismal is true of us every day. Wherever the font is present, it is a reminder that our baptism is also present—here, today. When we dip our fingers into holy water as we enter church and bless ourselves in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we echo the sign of the cross and remember that we are the baptized who gather...
there. When the assembly is sprinkled with holy water at Mass on a Sunday through the year or after the homily on Easter, it serves notice that these waters of our baptism are living still and touch our lives daily. We know once again that we are “the walking wet”!

So when someone else’s baptism takes place in the midst of the community, we begin to recognize that it is not so much theirs we see as it is our baptism, into which they are being joined. What we witness is the one baptism, into the one Lord Christ, by the one Spirit, of which the Scriptures speak. The words of the baptismal liturgy express something that is the true, living reality of our lives today. These words tell us something about who we really are.

The words are simple enough. But what if we were to let them linger a bit, and hear them echo along the paths of our daily routines? What might we learn in fresh ways about this calling to be the baptized, the disciples, the community of Jesus’ followers? What might it mean to be sealed, to be marked? What might it mean for the Holy Spirit to act on us in this way? What might it mean for us to be thus designated to be “claimed as Christ’s own,” to belong to Christ?

Surely, being claimed for Christ means that we live in the protection and care of Christ. “As a mother comforts her child,” God reminds us through the prophet, “so I will comfort you” (Isa 66:13). God does not leave us comfortless or alone. The grace and forgiveness promised in the Gospel are securely ours in Christ. The Holy Spirit has come upon us to make us new, and to make us together a new society, a new creation.

But it must as surely mean that we are placed at Christ’s disposal. In baptism, we are claimed by Christ to be joined to his own mission in the world! The liturgy of the Church of South India (a union of Anglican and Protestant churches in that part of India) includes a service of covenant renewal, and in it there is a prayer the baptized are invited to pray: “Put me to what you will!” The prayer contains a profound acknowledgement that we have been laid hold of by Christ, and we are now at his service, joined to his mission in the world that led to his sacrificial death, made to be witnesses of his resurrection by the power of the Holy Spirit. As the apostle Paul put it, “Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4).
It may help to listen again to some of the last words of Jesus before his ascension. In John’s gospel, there is a distinct emphasis on Jesus’ self-understanding that he was sent by the Father. As one author has put it, “what makes Christ Christ [the “anointed” one] is his sense of having been sent” (Winn 1981). That is what makes it so remarkable when we hear what Jesus said to his disciples—then and now: “As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you” (John 21:17). So what the gospel says of Christ must be said of the church as well: “What makes the church the church is its having been sent.”

We learn something of the same thing when we consider two other words we often use. The word apostle comes from the Greek word that means “one who is sent.” Jesus gave the Twelve that name when he began sending them out to announce his message in the surrounding villages (Mark 3:13-15). The name given to these twelve, and then to others in the New Testament church, was intended to refer not only to them but also to the whole church they represented. With the Nicene Creed, we confess “one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.”

Mission is another word we use that originates from these New Testament ideas. The English word mission comes from the Latin word missio, meaning “to send.” When we speak of God’s mission becoming our mission, we are saying that God’s purposes are achieved in part by sending, and we are the ones sent!

This sending is as true of each individual in the church as of the church as a whole. In baptism we are baptized and anointed according to the way Jesus was sent into the world, to do his Father’s will, to go into the world for the sake of the world’s salvation. In other words, in baptism we have been marked and sealed into the path of Jesus, joined to his own mission.

Being sent in these senses does not have to mean any of us must uproot and go some place else. It may mean that for some of us. However, for most of us recognizing we are sent helps us to be clear about who we are, right here in the place where God has planted us. And it helps us to be clear about the fact that God has intentionally put us here, and that there are reasons why God has done that. God wants the living presence of a faithful disciple community to live in the neighborhood! That way God can show everyone what it looks like when the reign of God comes and takes up residence in a company of people.

Baptism takes us on a lifelong path of discipleship, and baptism puts mission squarely into the heart of what life as the people of God is all about. As twentieth-

**Anointed and Sent**

God wants the living presence of a faithful disciple community to live in the neighborhood!
century theologian Emil Brunner put it, “The church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning” (108). Mission is the “startling word from Jesus about how we are to live as a baptized, reborn people called to be a sign of God’s presence and activity, to be a witness to God’s reign” (Westerhoff, 25). This is the baptismal truth about us.

To appreciate more fully the depth of these affirmations about our baptism, it may help to walk among several biblical portraits of its meaning—portraits in the life of Jesus and the experience of the earliest disciples. These portraits open up the daily meaning of baptism by helping us recognize what we are baptized for, what we are baptized into, and what we are baptized with.

**Baptized for . . .**

Anticipating the one who would come after him, John, who is also called “the baptizer,” went out into the Judean wilderness near Jerusalem and began baptizing all who would come. He was proclaiming “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3, Mark 1:4). According to Matthew, John said that he was baptizing with water “for repentance” (3:11). By using the word “repentance,” he meant to say that this baptism was about “a change of mind” (the literal meaning of the Greek word used here by the Gospel writers). Baptism certainly included the forgiveness of sins (washing, cleansing). That was necessary because of the direction in which the people’s lives had been going. But now, all that is set aside and people are set on a new path, a changed course of action. They are heading out in a new direction because of this “U-turn of the mind,” as one theologian has put it. The gospel of Luke makes it emphatic: baptism puts one on a new path of action (see Luke 3:8-14).

The Jewish people came out to be baptized for what can best be called a covenant renewal. Following their Exodus from Egypt God made a covenant with Israel—a binding agreement, established by God’s redeeming action, pledging God’s faithfulness to care for them in every way, and expecting allegiance and trust from them. “I am the God who brought you out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:2-3). Israel was given instruction about periodic ceremonies of covenant renewal so that they would not forget their obligations of trust and loyalty. John’s baptism bore the marks of such a renewal.

This understanding of John’s baptism helps us make sense of the response Jesus gave when he offered himself for baptism and John at first wanted to refuse. John said, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus answered, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness” (Mark 1:14-15). Jesus saw his baptism in covenant terms, and he was committing himself to fulfill all that the covenant required, fulfilling both thorough trust in God’s care and obedient allegiance to God’s rule. The reign of God that Jesus
continued to announce called for the same from everyone. Through baptism, Jesus calls us to be followers who receive and enter such a reign as this. We are baptized for a life of covenant faithfulness.

**Baptized into . . .**

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* indicates that “Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ: ‘Therefore . . . we are members one of another.’ Baptism incorporates us *into the Church*. From the baptismal fonts is born the one People of God of the New Covenant, which transcends all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races, and sexes: ‘For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body’” (CCC 1267). To be baptized *into* the Church, *into* the one body of Christ, means being baptized first and foremost *into* Christ himself. So the *Catechism* continues: “Incorporated into Christ by Baptism, the person baptized is configured to Christ” (CCC 1272).

When the Apostle Paul spoke of the significance of baptism in his letter to the Romans, he explored what *into Christ* must certainly mean:

> Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:2-5)

Later in Jesus’ time of ministry, he said, “I came to bring [literally, ‘cast’] fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!” (Luke 12:49-50). He was speaking, of course, about his own death. At another time, when James and John came privately to ask for special privilege at the time when Jesus would come into his glory, he asked if they were ready for the cost: “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:37-38).

The daily meaning of our baptism is dying and rising with Jesus—dead to sin and alive to righteousness. On the one hand, baptism means that the path of Jesus’ own sacrificial suffering is the path of the disciple. Prior to his death, Jesus had indicated to his disciples that he “must go to Jerusalem and undergo great sufferings . . . and be killed, and on the third day be raised” (Matthew 16:21). Then immediately he said, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (16:24).

Because baptism is understood to be “into Christ’s death,” from earliest times there have been baptismal fonts made in the form of a cross, or on occasion in the
shape of a sarcophagus (a stone coffin used for burial above ground or in a crypt). The dramatic imagery became even more emphatic for a friend of mine when not long ago she was in Zambia and attended a baptism. There she encountered something completely unexpected. As the people made their way to the place of baptism, the procession was led by all the customary people and liturgical symbols. But with them were a couple of people carrying something that caught her by surprise. These were the “shovelers,” she was told! When the procession arrived, they were the ones who proceeded to dig the grave-ditch that was going to be the baptismal font! It would not be a font full of water—extended drought in the country meant that water was in too short a supply. A small amount of water would be used, down in this grave into which where to be baptized would descend. In a country so full of death and funerals, due in a large way to the effects of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the baptism was poignant. Baptism is dying and rising with Jesus!

While baptism is “into Christ’s death” it is equally “into Christ’s rising again.” The Zambians baptized that day rose out of their grave-ditch as Christ had from his. The fonts of the early church were normally laid from west to east to capture the imagery. The baptized would go into the font from the west and come out toward the east, embracing the new morning’s light, welcomed into the new life of the resurrected Jesus. Baptism is a daily dying and rising with Christ. Jesus calls us to the way of the cross, and to cruciform (cross-shaped) life as the people of God. Jesus calls us also to the joyful confidence of an Easter people. We are baptized into joyful new life in the way of Jesus.

**Baptized with . . .**

John the baptizer already knew something about another, greater baptism that was on its way. “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). Following his resurrection, Jesus told his followers to stay in Jerusalem after he left them, and wait there for “the promise of the Father.” “This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:4-5). He went on to tell them what would happen when this occurred. “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come.
upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Several days pass, Jesus ascends to heaven, and they wait. Then it comes true: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place . . . All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:1-4).

On that day, the witnessing community was born. The Spirit was given to enliven the kind of witness from us that the “tongues, as of fire” symbolized. For such a witness to the crucified and risen Christ we are sent. For this we have the promised power and presence of the Holy Spirit. We are baptized with power for our mission of witness.

**Called and Sent**

These biblical images about our baptism underscore that our baptism means we are both called and sent by God. Something of the core identity of the Christian community, and each follower of Jesus is bound up in being called and sent. Throughout the scriptures, we notice over and over that God calls the people of Israel and then the new people of God, the church—calling them to come near, calling them to listen and see, calling them to be with God. Invariably, when God called anyone, it anticipated that God was sending them somewhere or to do something. When God “called” Moses to come closer and see the bush that was burning and not consumed, God welcomed Moses to that holy ground to come to know God by name. Then quickly, God told him what God intended to do for the Israelites who were enslaved in hard labor in Egypt, and turned to Moses and said “And I am sending you” to Pharaoh to gain their release. When Jesus appointed the twelve to be called apostles (literally, “sent ones”), he called them to be with him and to be sent out by him. The call and the sending ride together.

One way we can speak about this calling-sending is with the notion of vocation. But we will have to sort out some uses of the word that work a little differently. For one thing, the word vocation in ordinary popular language has come to mean a job or a career. But the word vocation is derived from the Latin word vocare, meaning “to call,” so it has the original meaning of a calling. That implies someone calling, and someone hearing that call. Vocation in that sense might correspond with someone’s job or career, but even if so, it signals something much more. It sees in the career path work to which God has called a person.

Similarly, within the church’s life, we are used to thinking of “vocations” in terms of people who follow God’s call to enter the priesthood or the religious life. I am suggesting that we should understand vocation—or more simply stated ‘calling’—as something true of every Christian. Jesus has called us—each of us individually and all of us together in the church—to follow him, to be with him. The calling is a sending. In other words, a Christian’s vocation has to do with the
way God takes us along and joins us to God’s own mission in the world. Our vocation has to do with the kinds of things God has in mind for how we live, act and speak as the community that represents the reign of God. Our vocation has to do with the mission into which we are sent, the mission to which our baptism has anointed us.

The point of all this is that being a Christian is not just about receiving God’s grace and forgiveness, and being assured of the gift of eternal life. Nor is it sufficient to think that being a Christian is about experiencing the Holy Spirit’s power to transform our life, as though that were an end in itself. Being a Christian is not about receiving or acquiring, it is about giving and participating—participating in what God is intending for the world.

This is important to recognize in a society whose religious activity is marked most by a kind of religious consumerism. People seek to fulfill their self-identified spiritual needs, and churches are among the places they go to achieve that. Consumerist habits conceive of the church as a place to go; Christians are called “church-goers.”

Baptism tells us this is not the way it works. The Gospel is not focused on what special benefits we can acquire from God, but on God’s call to shift our allegiance and be joined to God’s intentions in and for the world. There is surely benefit in that! But the benefit comes by way of being joined to the company that walks the way of the cross, in view of the new heavens and new earth that comes at the end of the path. It is not about what we get, but about what we give. It is not about having our own needs served, but about serving God among the needs of the world.

Speaking of being sent, and of the idea of a calling, a vocation, is helpful because it keeps the focus on the service to the reign of God for which the church has been chosen. It helps because it suggests there will be particular, concrete ways for us to discern what will be our own particular calling. Vocation does not mean taking on everything conceivable that we know God wants and intends. But it does mean paying attention to what is immediately in front of us and responding in a way that is faithful to God’s purposes.

The church, the one body of Christ into which we have been baptized, is a community of people created by the Holy Spirit. We are called as a community, and we are sent as a community. The calling of God is a shared, communal one. In this context each of us will discover the particular aspects of that calling that God sends us to fulfill. It is for the sake of fulfilling the community’s calling and sending that each of us is given special gifts of the Spirit—“for the common good,” the Apostle Paul says. The dynamics of the reign of God cannot be lived separately
from that, because God’s reign is about relationships, it is about justice, peace, and joy (see Rom 14:17). These are experienced in tangible, embodied form by a community that lives these things together in witness to the world.

So every local parish, living together as a “gospeled” community, finds itself invited by God to be clear about the form of its vocation in the particular place to which God has sent it. The church’s calling is in one sense very general and broad, a calling we share with the whole church, in all its expressions in all parts of the world and throughout history. It is the calling to be the followers of Jesus. As such, we are set on a path of discipleship, invited and commissioned to fashion as our own a way of life that corresponds to the way of Jesus, that resonates with his life and embodies his teachings, that lives the grateful life of those who know ourselves to be forgiven sinners and to be liberated to new life in the reign of God.

In addition to that, the Holy Spirit leads every local gospeled community to find and fulfill its own particular feet-on-the-ground, hands-on vocation. What are we called and sent for, practically and particularly, in the place where God has sent us? Why does God have us here? And how will we discern what is significant about this place now in the light of the mission of God’s reign? What is our calling “at this time, in this place”—now, and here?

A few years ago, I participated on a research team looking at particular parishes and congregations that gave evidence of living very conscious of their character as the sent people of God. As we visited and observed those communities, we summarized what we seemed to be seeing in church after church—a cluster of “patterns in missional faithfulness” (see Barrett et al., 2004). One of the most critical patterns that we saw repeatedly was the practice of “discerning missional vocation.” All the churches in our study had deliberate, and many times unique, ways of keeping the question alive: What are we here for? What is our particular calling from God?

Pathways Forward

If baptism means we have been sent, what will that look like? Here are a few things that suggest some basic directions and pathways:

1. With all our companions who are the church, we are charged to be a living demonstration of the gospel. We are commissioned to embody the good news so that any who observe us will see what God envisions for the world. We are what one theologian has called “God’s experimental garden,” showing what is possible by the Spirit of God. We will be in active relationships with other disciples that exhibit generous love and mutual accountability.
2. In each of our own places of residence, work and leisure, we are commissioned to be the presence of Christ and Christ’s body the church in the fabric of the social life of the world. This means we will know that we walk to the beat of different drummer, and to be Christ-like in our kind of world can be very costly. We will take seriously that our discipleship is most at stake in the pulses of public life, where we have been placed.

3. We will seek the peace and justice of the coming “day of the Lord” (as the prophets liked to put it). We will care about the things God cares about, and work toward those ends, never deceiving ourselves that we bring in God’s reign—God does that. We will work for justice when the world’s systems show themselves incapable of it, and we will defend all degraded by having justice denied them. We work in hope. We live in light of the end God has promised is coming, a source of hope that is good news among people who have no other hope to which they can turn.

4. In the midst of all we become, and do, we will also willingly tell people where this new life is to be found—in whom this new life is to be found. We are all the witnesses, merely the ones who point—as John the Baptist did—and say “Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

References and Resources


