

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 7/7/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

I read an article this past week that tells how a Roman Catholic priest resigned after an investigation by the larger Church revealed that he had used one wrong word for more than twenty years when performing baptisms. The priest during baptisms had regularly used the word “We” rather than the word “I,” saying “We baptize you in the name of the FATHER, and of the SON, and of the HOLY SPIRIT.” Further, the diocese has determined that the baptisms were invalid and would have to be performed again. The priest has since apologized and vowed to dedicate himself to helping those families who were impacted by his error.

Pastors/priests do have a responsibility to oversee the distribution of the sacraments so that it is done properly in and through the congregation. That’s why it is (usually) the pastor who speaks the scripturally-given words during the blessing of the sacraments at distribution or application. But what happens if the wrong words are spoken?

While this is an issue of Roman Catholic policy and practice, and it is not my place to determine whether this is right or wrong, I do have some thoughts. The diocese said in a statement, “The issue with using ‘We’ is that it is not the community that baptizes a person, rather, it is CHRIST, and HIM alone, who presides at all the sacraments, and so it is CHRIST JESUS who baptizes.” I would first wonder how, then, do they describe the role of the priest who applies the water and speaks the words. Is he then JESUS? Is he taking the role of JESUS? Or, why not say, “JESUS baptizes you in the name of...?” And, since JESUS is part of the triune (three-in-one) GODHEAD, isn’t it really “THEY” who baptize? The command to baptize given in the Gospel of Matthew begins with JESUS’ instruction to “make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the FATHER, and of the SON, and of the HOLY SPIRIT,” but no instruction or example of what pronoun or name is to be used in the act of baptizing other than that it is done in the name of the triune GOD. I sometimes say, “If I were GOD, I would have made it abundantly clear exactly which words are to be spoken and how much water is to be used and in what format. But thank GOD I’m not GOD, because we tend to make things much more complicated than GOD wants it to be.”

I was once accused by a fellow board member, the wife of a Lutheran Church Missouri Synod pastor, who said that I had used the incorrect words recently during Holy Communion. (She didn’t like the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and regularly attacked me in front of the board.) I apologized if I had spoken the wrong words and then to make sure that I said them correctly in the future, I asked which form she and the LCMS pastors she claimed to speak for wanted used. Did they want the words of JESUS recorded in Matthew or Luke or John which are similar, but aren’t quite like what we use on Sundays? Or did they want the words of JESUS from Mark’s Gospel which come the closest to what we say, depending on the Bible translation you use. Or did they want Paul’s words I Corinthians which we sometimes use or incorporate into the words from Mark? And did they (she) want those words in English, which is not how JESUS said them, or did they want them in Aramaic, which is how JESUS likely spoke them, or in Greek, which is the original language in which they are recorded. Yes, I was being a little passive-aggressive, but I also wanted her to understand that there are a lot of possibilities that inform these practices. And I did explain that the formulas (yes, plural) that we follow come from different sources and what’s more important than what we say (and that’s not to say that it isn’t important) is what GOD does to and for the person who receives these sacraments in faith.

Which brings me to another, and I think most important, point when it comes to this issue of baptism by the priest when the alleged wrong word was used. Does GOD not bless the person who comes or who is brought in faith to receive the sacrament of baptism because it isn't done the "right" way? Does GOD not grant them the grace that is promised when the water is applied and the Word including the name of our triune GOD is spoken? The Roman Catholic Church is now going to have to try to find all these people and baptize them "correctly." But what if they miss someone, or what if someone has already died and can no longer be rebaptized? I truly doubt GOD will reject them from the heavenly blessing JESUS promised just because we didn't get the words quite right.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey