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The Resource Page

... creative and practical ideas

Brought to you this month
by Rusty Brock



Shall we gather at the river? Baptism as the amen to worship

In many Baptist churches baptism occurs at the beginning of the service, a trend that began around the mid 1980s. Prior to this time, most churches equipped with indoor baptisteries conducted baptismal services on Sunday evening. While having a service on Sunday evening removed all of the logistical obstacles of a Sunday morning baptism, it also prevented the majority of the congregation from participating in the baptism celebration, given that, in many churches attendance on Sunday evening is substantially less than Sunday morning services.

Lavonn Brown, retired pastor of First Baptist Church, Norman, Okla., says that as he talked with children about baptism he realized many of them had never seen a baptism service, largely because they were held on Sunday evenings. In light of this realization, Dr. Brown encouraged the church to move the baptismal services to Sunday mornings. As a result of this change, FBC Norman experienced an increase in requests for baptism.

From a logistical standpoint, the Sunday morning baptism is positioned at the beginning of the service so that the minister and the candidates can be ready for the baptism prior to the start of the service. Then, following the baptism, during the opening hymn, the minister can remove the baptismal robe and waders and quickly return to the sanctuary platform to facilitate worship. Likewise, the baptismal candidate changes clothes and returns for the remainder of worship. Let us not forget, however, that the best-laid plans often fail, resulting in ministers conducting the remainder of the service in wet pants due to leaky waders.

While positioning baptisms at the beginning of the service has served many congregations well and seems practical,

placing the baptism as a “prelude” to worship diminishes the importance of this covenant act and precludes the appropriate congregational celebration. In addition, if a member of a candidate’s family is even a few minutes late for worship, that person is likely to miss this important event. Therefore, the time has come for yet another progression in how we conduct baptismal services

Instead of conducting baptisms at the beginning of the service, we might have them as the finalé or the “amen” of the Sunday morning worship experience. Let me share how we celebrate baptisms at Northwest Baptist Church, where I currently serve.

When a baptism is scheduled, it becomes the theme of that week’s worship service. We select liturgy, hymns, scriptures and choral anthems and plan the sermon message in hopes of fostering a congregational celebration of the baptism event. When plausible, we also have the baptism candidate(s) or family members involved in worship leadership.

Following the sermon and a hymn of response, the congregation begins singing the hymn “Shall We Gather at the River.” While singing, the congregants move out of their pews and make their way down to the altar and platform area. While many people are still standing in the aisles and in some rows, the idea is that the congregation is gathering for the baptism. (Note: If your baptistery is above the choir loft, the choir can simply turn around to celebrate the baptism.) At Northwest, we have the nursery workers bring in the children as the congregation moves forward, so that they can witness the baptism with the rest of the congregation.

After everyone has gathered, the minister and candidate(s) enter the water for the baptism. The gathering of the members

creates a united voice as I perform the baptism and proclaim, “Buried with Christ in baptism, rise and walk in newness of life.” The baptism is followed by words of affirmation from the congregation, and then the chorus to “Go Tell It on the Mountain” is sung as the benediction.

I first performed a baptism at the end of a morning worship service while serving as pastor of Fellowship Baptist Church in Fitzgerald, Ga. The baptistery at Fellowship is located underneath the sanctuary platform, so a decision was made to conduct the baptism following the other elements of worship. As the congregation gathered around the platform for the first baptism, there was an incredible moment of being the presence of Christ in celebration with a new believer.

In conclusion, celebrating baptisms as the “amen” to worship provides a greater reverence and sense of celebration to this sacred covenant event. It allows the baptism to become the central focus of the worship service, permitting the congregation to have a participatory role rather than simply being spectators. In addition, the minister doesn’t have to worry about getting wet because the service is concluded following the baptism. (In fact, I have stopped wearing waders altogether. I just put my robe on over shorts and get wet with the candidates!)

It is my hope that other congregations might consider moving their baptismal services from being the “prelude” in worship to being the “amen.” This change could bring about spiritual renewal as congregations who are “gathered at the river” become the presence and body of Christ and as the baptism event becomes the central focus of the worship celebration. At the very least, I hope we might have more dialogue about the significance of how we conduct our baptisms. **BT**

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