The frightening side of baptism

# Peter Leithart argues that the sacrament’s violence is surprisingly good news.

by Annelisa Burns in the March 23, 2022 issue

## In Review


### Baptism

A Guide to Life from Death

By Peter J. Leithart
Lexham Press
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*Baptism: A Guide to Life from Death* aims to bridge the divisions that exist within Christianity over baptism. Part of Lexham Press's Christian Essentials series, Peter Leithart's book focuses on the theological foundations of the sacrament, which Leithart believes are the key to arriving at a unified understanding. The theologian and minister calls quarrels over baptism a "travesty," expressing dismay that "God's sign of unity is a spring of division." He argues that "to arrive at unity, we need to recover the baptismal imagination of earlier generations. We need to start at the foundation and work our way up."

Leithart begins by establishing a definition of what, exactly, baptism is. Baptism is a "doorway" to the church; it works "because the church works." Jesus' baptism is the one true baptism, so "every other baptism unites us to the baptism of Jesus." Baptism is performative. It "doesn't just *picture* an announcement, [it] *announces*." It is the gospel. It is a seal, God's brand on us.

Baptism is also independent of us: "Baptism preaches whether or not anyone believes it. . . . Baptism is a ritual clock. It tells the world's time . . . even if no one sets his watch by it." The water does not care whom it baptizes, how much or how little that person believes in the sacrament. It is only us humans who have qualms over whether the baptized person fully understands what's happening; the water just baptizes.

Surrounded by exaltations of water's representation of new life, a contrasting insight emerges and becomes one of Leithart's most compelling themes: water is dangerous, and thus, baptism has a frightening side. Although Christians tend to focus on water's positive connotations, Leithart notes that the Bible offers plenty of reasons to see a sinister element in the water of baptism. "Israel's enemies often come from the sea . . . flooding Israel like the wave of a tsunami. Israel's heroes are landlubbers—shepherds, not sailors. . . . Its most famous sailor, Jonah, ends up overboard."

While water's violence is itself intimidating, what's even more startling is God's involvement in the violence: the biblical God is "Lord of the water, the true storm God. In wrath, he sends drought. . . . He destroys the first world with water . . . and

inundates Egypt's river world with plagues of water, blood, and ice." Water's violence—in which God actively participates—makes baptism violent. Adding baptism's dangerousness to its inevitability makes it into a foreboding force. Leithart wants to turn one of the church's most hopeful sacraments into something to be, in part, feared—and it works.

Leithart shows how baptism, the sacrament of rebirth, is intimately connected to death. In the flood story (Gen. 6–9), God regrets making the earth and destroys it in a flood instead of trying to fix it. Waters of life "become waters of death . . . from water it came; to water it returns." Reform is not enough, baptism reminds us. Everyone in the flood story dies in some fashion: "those outside the ark drown. Those in the ark die to the world that then was." For Leithart, baptism gives us death as a gift.

The violence of baptism is, surprisingly, good news. If baptism is death, then "Christians don't live toward death but from death. Death lies behind us. . . . As it gives the gift of death, baptism gives the gift of an open future." Or perhaps more accurately, baptism gives us the gift of a guide, as the book's subtitle puts it: a guide to life from death. Leithart provocatively challenges bright, optimistic notions of baptism as just a symbol of rebirth. In revealing the sacrament's darker side, he shapes it into something deeper and more intimate.

However, as Leithart writes about baptism's inevitability and violence, he relies heavily on dualistic language that I find troubling. In a chapter on the overlap between baptism and circumcision, for example, he writes that baptism "makes us new creatures by stripping off the flesh and giving us the Spirit," just as in circumcision "flesh is cut away [and] all that comes from Adam is removed." He concludes this chapter by doubling down on flesh as negative: "'Flesh' isn't just 'sinfulness' but refers to our natural associations and affinities. Flesh divides." The flesh/spirit dualism Leithart appeals to here can be harmful. It can lead to alienation of ourselves from the physical world, other people, and even our own bodies. It also risks underplaying the crucial role that physical elements play in the sacraments. Sacramentalism necessitates affirming the temporal world.

In a chapter called "Crossing Jordan," Leithart focuses on how baptism "makes us new creatures by making us conquerors, soldiers of Jesus, the new and better Joshua." He relies heavily on the language of war throughout the chapter, portraying God as a winning soldier who triumphs over evil and Christ as a defender of the

oppressed who is “greater than Moses, a defender who is already Victor.” At his baptism Jesus is shown to be “the new Joshua,” one who consequently “conquers and inherits all nations.” For the rest of us, then, our own baptisms give us the same victory and inheritance of Jesus: “Baptized into his Jordan baptism, we’re co-conquerors and co-heirs.” This uncritical reliance on the word *conqueror* enforces the idea that there’s a clean and evident division in the world between good and evil. It encourages us to see God fully revealed in the powerful instead of the powerless, in the conqueror instead of the conquered, in the strong instead of the weak.

Leithart also argues that the world is “ours, and we have the technology to conquer it”—the “armor of God” from Ephesians 6. He claims that “because we’re heirs of God, all things serve us.” For example, “sickness offers a chance to bear a cross with good cheer,” and “poverty serves our maturation.” This kind of language presents the physical world—and the people and circumstances we encounter in it—as objects for our use.

Leithart anticipates critiques like mine:

> For some Christians, talk of conquest and inheritance feels alien or even immoral. Ancient Israel conquered territory, but Christians are called to suffer in and with Jesus, a suffering servant rather than a conquering commander. . . . We must resist these spiritualizing tendencies. We are of the faith of Abraham and so are heirs with Abraham, who is ‘heir of the *world*.’ . . . All things belong to those who are in Christ. . . . Everything is ours because we are Christ’s and Christ is God’s.

To me, these words read like a theology of glory. They imply that we are not just conquerors, those who happen to have more power than others; we are *entitled* conquerors. History shows that this kind of theology can lead to, among other dangers, Christian justifications of White supremacy and colonialism.

Despite these problems (and the male pronouns for God used throughout the book), I find Leithart’s examination of baptism helpful. The book’s illustrations complement the writing, creating a spiritually and intellectually stimulating guide to baptism that challenges me to rethink a sacrament that I take for granted. Leithart’s analyses of biblical passages and the connections he draws from them are exceptional. His conclusion, too, is rather inspiring: baptism, he argues, makes us all prophets. To be

a prophet is to be filled with the Spirit; in baptism, “you’ve been soaked in the Spirit: don’t quench or grieve him, and you will prophesy, you will see visions, you will dream dreams.”