

*Robert W. Jenson*

CHRISTIAN INITIATION: ETHICS AND ESCHATOLOGY

I did not choose the three terms of my assignment: "initiation", "ethics" and "eschatology." It would take a degree of arrogance that I do not have, to select the universe for one's subject in this fashion. While I did not choose them, I am fortunate in your committee having chosen them. For in fact, as it turns out, the three terms nestle beautifully together and define a field of reflection that I have found enjoyable. Baptism is initiation into the Christian church, an ethical community. And baptism is initiation into the kingdom of God, the eschatological community. And it does both these things at once, thereby setting up a dialectic. What more could any systematic theologian ask for? That baptism does doubly initiate, is, I take it, dogma. It could be argued; but on this occasion I will assume it, and go on.

If one event can thus initiate into two communities --the church and the kingdom of God-- then those two must somehow be mutually determined. The matter of the mutual determination of the church and the kingdom is a large part of the matter of Christian ethics and eschatology--which is what I mean about the size of the assignment. Fortunately, I can for present purposes finesse some of these heavy matters by noting that the two communities must in any case of their material relationship *be* related; that is, by noting a purely formal mutual determination which must obtain. The eschatological community

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must itself be an ethical community; and the ethical community of the church must itself be eschatologically determined. And this purely formal determination will--as I hope you will come to agree--be quite enough for me to be going on with.

The kingdom must be an ethical community. That is, the kingdom will not be a mere collection of blissful human monads, but a polity, a group linked and mutually animated by crisscrossing relations of freedom and love. It is not even logically possible that the kingdom of God should have a population of one. That, to be sure, is not how we usually think of the matter. As I think of heaven, I of course expect to see all of you there, and my grandparents, and my Sunday school teachers, and all; but if I should turn out to be there alone, I will still be satisfied with the situation. The mere fact that it is so, shows that I have not conceived the kingdom of God as an ethical community, that is to say, as an actual community: a group that is not a mere collection but mutually determined by love and freedom.

Now the other side of the relation. The ethical community of the church is eschatologically determined. That is, the moral life of the church is determined by the fact of the eschaton, by the fact of the coming kingdom; and the moral life of the church therefore is always in at least potential radical discontinuity with the moral life of other communities around it, that make up the human world. I want to spend a little more time with this.

It is the reality and the import of this discontinuity between the moral life of the church and that of the world around it, that the Reformation doctrine of justification states. In the Reformation doctrine of justification, the gospel, the proclamation of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, is in its actual doing, in its

character as *viva vox*, understood as nothing less than the last judgment let out ahead of time. The Reformation doctrine of justification is instruction to would-be speakers of the gospel: speak the gospel as *last* judgment, as a judgment on the *entire* worth of hearers' lives.

The gospel is a last word. It comes after all is said and done; it is spoken when it is too late for bargaining, and too late for promises to do better, and too late for worries about relapse, it is an *unconditional* declaration of the value of the hearers' lives. The Reformation doctrine of justification is instructions to would-be preachers to talk about their hearers' lives and Jesus Christ's resurrection so that their talking works this way. Moreover, the last judgment spoken ahead of time is not merely unconditional news, unconditional judgment of the worth of the hearers' lives, but unconditionally *good* news, unconditionally *affirmative* judgment on hearers' lives. The gospel is good news just because it is spoken ahead of time; for since God thus does not wait for us to be finished with our lives to judge them, his judgment can rest only in his own will, which, since he is the Father of Jesus, is a good will.

It is in this proleptic character of the gospel that its ethical relevance lies. Since we hear the last judgment on our lives before we finish our lives, we have our lives in this world to finish after this hearing. Thus the peculiar character of the moral life of the believing community is that it is the common life of those who are past having anything to lose or gain, the common life of those for whom ulterior motivations and mitigating considerations, while doubtless present and influential, are nevertheless morally and ethically irrelevant, the common life of those for whom it is too late for virtue to have any reward but itself. If virtue is not its own only

reward, then we are of all men most miserable, because it is too late for us to receive any other. As the *Augsburg Confession* puts it in Article VI: "It is taught among us that one must do good works of all sorts as God commands them for his sake." Period.

The Christian church is the polity within which the question, "But why should I do good?" can only have the answer, "If you have to ask, don't bother." Louis Armstrong is said to have responded to someone who asked him, "What is jazz?" by saying, "If you gotta ask, you ain't got it." And to the question, "But why not do evil, that good may come of it, that grace may abound?", Paul had no more satisfactory answer. He only could say, "Well, if you still ask that question, we'll start all over again. Let me explain baptism." If you gotta ask "Why do good in the Christian church?", then do evil, for God's sake! The Christian church is the polity within which morality and ethical reflection and discourse have this eschatological determination, in which they come after the last judgment.

There are two aspects of this eschatological morality that I want to single out. First, the ethics that operate within the Christian church are freed from the necessity of agreement with the ethics of other communities to which believers will also belong. The Christian church is cut off from the ways of the world by the end of the world which has happened to it already.

To be sure, since the kingdom of God will be the fulfillment of all history and not just that of the church, the good of the kingdom and the good of all human communities are the same. The love that faith makes possible in the believing community, God makes possible in other ways elsewhere. The love that faith makes possible in the

believing community and the love recommended by the golden rule in all its world-wide versions are one and the same.

But it does not follow from this that the world always seeks its own good. The kingdom of God is the good of the world; but it does not follow that the world seeks the kingdom. And more to our point, it does not even follow that the world *knows* its own good. It is quite possible for the world's ethics and not merely its action to be perverse. It is quite possible for a community positively to commend as good, what is in fact evil and will destroy the community. Therefore, the believing community must expect that sometimes what it feels and knows about the good, and what the world and surrounding communities feel and know about the good, will agree. And sometimes the believing community must expect that they will not agree.

The church is eschatologically free to live equally well with either situation. Indeed the church is even free to manipulate these possibilities to the purposes of its mission. When the church is seeking to penetrate a culture, as in the great days of the 4th century in the West, it may legitimately and properly emphasize the continuity of its vision of good with that of the culture. But when the church is seeking freedom from a dying or manifestly perverse world, or must live in a ghetto built for it by the culture in which it lives, then the church is free actively to train its members in prophetic dissent and underground subversion.

Second, the believing community is an ethical community in which the difference between rights and duties does not apply. The whole ethic of modern America and the most of the modern West is built around that difference. I am concerned about my rights; and you are concerned about my duties. And I am concerned about your duties;

and you are concerned about your rights. The Constitution, that whole fantastic apparatus, exists for the sole purpose of keeping these two laboriously sorted out: my rights are what you must do for me; my duties are what I must do for you. But in the church, the questions, "Well, what do I have to do?" and, "Well, what do you have to do for me?" have no answers at all. The answer to both is always, "Well, if you gotta ask, nothing."

This does not mean, by the way, what we are at this period in the history of the American church strongly tempted to make it mean. It does not mean that the church is the community with *only rights*: the universal and supreme liberation movement, the community that has found rights for everybody, as many rights as you need. The church is not the community in which there are only rights and no duties; the church is the community in which there are neither. The Reformation doctrine of justification--which is what we are talking about this whole time--did not say that the gospel frees us to *ignore* the law. It said that the gospel frees us from that final core of egocentric defiance that expresses itself in the questions, "What do I gotta do?" and "What do you gotta do for me?" Just so the gospel frees us to *love* the law.

The gospel frees us to a natural coincidence of God's will and ours. We who have no rights or duties, for whom there are no answers to "gotta" questions, who must live our lives with each other after hearing the last judgment are in this respect perfect like our heavenly Father. We have nothing to win or lose. Our will is intrinsically in the same situation as his. The point about the church as an ethical community is not its willingness to accept just everything. The point about the church is rather its freedom to devote itself single-mindedly to justice and mutual responsibility.

So far a very brief discussion of the way in which the kingdom of God, the eschatological community, is ethical, and in which the church, an ethical community, is eschatological. All that was to establish the scope of my main argument, which I may now begin.

It will not, I think, need to be much argued that throughout modern history the mutual determination the church's ethical community and the kingdom's eschatological community has become increasingly hard to realize. On the one side, we are for the most part unable to await the kingdom as an actual, that is ethically constituted, community. When is the last time any of you preached or heard a sermon in which the Kingdom was *described*, proclaimed in advance in its communal and moral *content*? Old-time religionists among us strive one by one to enter bliss; and if only one of them makes it, he will be happy. And the rest of us make do with sundry existential or liberated or processed metaphysical adumbrations of salvation, whose even more paltry individualism is only obscured by sophisticated equivocation.

On the other side, the side of the church, the Western church has sat about for centuries observing the collapse of its Constantinian penetration of Western civilization. An entire generation of theologians was schooled in the principle that all you had to do was say, "The Constantinian settlement has collapsed," and your career was launched. But even as we have said such things, we have only become more slavish in our obedience to the Constantinian settlement. Even as the life of the Western world has become ever more nihilist, ever more empty, ever more flagrantly incoherent with the will of God, and even as the church's need for prophetic freedom from the world has therefore become ever more urgent, we have in fact become ever more addicted to baptizing every wind of the world's ethical

doctrine. Whatever the with-it group in our locality says is good this week, we suddenly discover to be the real meaning of the gospel. Churchly social service agencies are big abortion pushers. The woods are full of "pastoral counselors" who establish their claim to expertise in marital counseling by pointing to how well they survived their own divorces. And nobody laughs.

The mutual determination of the church's ethical community and the eschatological community of the kingdom is that on the one hand the kingdom is to be awaited as a real community, a net of moral relations between actual people, and that on the other hand the moral life and ethical discourse of the Christian church are eschatologically determined. This mutual determination has through the whole modern period of the church's life become more difficult to realize.

At least at the conceptual level, the cause of the difficulty is relatively well known. In the thought, and more important, in the piety and sacramental practice of the late antique and medieval church, the kingdom of God and the community of the church were able to be seen and understood together by a specific adaptation of antique metaphysics. This ran very roughly as follows. God, of course, knows in advance what the kingdom will be like--which seems reasonable and comes out of the Bible, more or less. By antique metaphysical doctrine, this divine knowledge, the content of the mind of God, is interpreted as a substantial reality, as, indeed, the realist sort of reality. This reality is then the timeless foundation, the eternal ground of all the temporal reality we live in. Thus the timeless reality of the mind of God is reflected by and in all temporal realities. The one particular temporal reality, the church, can be understood as very straightforwardly and unproblematically

built on the kingdom, as eternally real in the mind of God. And as built on the kingdom in the mind of God it reflects the kingdom.

Intellectually and in practice the history of the modern world has been mostly devoted to dismantling this classical Christian metaphysics. Nobody lives his life anymore, though he may have studied Tillich, on the ground of the eternal contents of the mind of God. At the very beginning of the history of dismantling is the Lutheran Reformation's insistence that the continuity between the church and the kingdom, their mutual determination, must be understood *christologically*. It is not established in eternity, but in the temporal event of the life, death, and resurrection of the Christ. Obviously, I will agree with that; but it leaves a lot still unsettled. And much of the history of Protestantism has been a search for specific christological continuities between the church and the kingdom of God.

Most of Protestantism has been a search for *immanent* continuities between the church and the kingdom of God. Properly so-called liberalism posited *historical* continuities between the church and the kingdom of God, which ran more or less as follows. There was once an extremely important religious and ethical historical personage, Jesus of Nazareth. His influence continues in history, and operates by way of his followers, the church. The impact of this continuing influence of Jesus in history is that human communities get better and better. The kingdom of God is the end of the process, which may be conceived of as an actual end or as the limit of an infinite series. But these days we are more likely to depend upon *psychological* continuities. The kingdom will be defined in terms, for example, of "wholeness": the kingdom is where everybody is whole. The Church is understood as the place where it is known that thinking about Jesus is good for your mental health, that it promotes wholeness.

And there again, there is supposed to be a mutual determination of the ethical life of the church and the kingdom of God.

For some time this whole Protestant enterprise has been not so much refuted as made to seem paltry, by the terrors of the 20th century and by the rediscovered grandeur of Biblical eschatology. Our century has one great attempt at something adequately radical to the task of seeing the church and the kingdom of God in their mutual determination, and that is the theology of Karl Barth. Luther had said: The Church and the Kingdom of God determine each other *in Christ*. Barth simply asked: Well, what is so sacred about our inherited conceptions of time, that we should not just take Luther literally? Why shouldn't we say that Jesus Christ, himself, the historical personage and sequence of events by that name, is in God the eternal ground of all things? What Greek metaphysics and, following them, the classical Christian theology sought in the content of the mind of God, in fact exists; but it is not the content of anybody's mere *mind*, it is an historical event named Jesus. Everything that happens is at its root a mere reflection of events and circumstances of the life of Christ.

Well now, of course, when students ask me about Barth and I try to explain this, they look at me puzzled and say, "But Jenson, you say that everything that happens is a reflection and a working out of Christ; how about what happened before Christ?" The answer to that is that it was Barth's radical intuition that there *is* no "before Christ," that this historical event is constitutive in the eternal God. It is the life of God that is lived in Palestine; and therefore, all creation and all that happens in creation happen inside what happened in Palestine; neither before nor after it, but internally to it.

It is this one vision that is refracted through all the volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*. Doubtless, in its own simplicity, it is true, marking an achievement behind which we may not regress. Yet by itself and as developed in Barth's systematics, neither will it quite do. There is a reason why everybody is impressed by Barth--if they ever read him--and then having read him don't believe him. For the posture Barth leaves us in is too much that of the disciples who were rebuked at the ascension for gazing off into a distance in which Christ has disappeared. "Jesus Christ, himself, is the eternal foundation of all reality," can mean that the eternal foundation comes down to dwell among us; but it can mean also that Jesus Christ flies off into Calvinist heaven. And it is the latter that seems to have triumphed in the full systematics of Barth.

So, where is the christological unity of the kingdom and the church? How is it that one baptism can initiate into both simultaneously? Where does it happen that the ethical life of the church comes to be a life lived after the last judgment, as the Lutheran doctrine of justification says? And where does it happen that the kingdom of God, the end of all things, acquires the character of a real human community in all its ethical complexities? Where is the christological unity of kingdom and church, of the eschatological and ethical communities? You will guess where I am heading: back to the title your committee gave me.

Through most of the history of Western Christianity we have presupposed that baptism can simultaneously initiate into the church and into the kingdom because those two are tied together some place and some way else. We have supposed that it is because the church and the kingdom are one in the metaphysical structure of things that baptism can initiate into both. Or we have supposed that it is

because in the church those historical influences of Jesus' good teaching, which will finally lead to the kingdom, are at work, that baptism can initiate into the church and the kingdom. Or we have supposed it is because in the church there is extra good counseling, which will no doubt finally provoke the kingdom of God, that baptism can initiate into both the church and the kingdom. Or . . .

The truth, I suspect, is much simpler. Baptism can initiate into both the church and the kingdom of God because baptism is what joins them in the first place. Baptism is itself God's act to create a human community that is eschatologically determined; and baptism is itself God's act to create a kingdom of God that will be a real human community. Baptism is, itself, as this worldly event, the christological act of God that identifies the ethical community of the church and the eschatological community of the kingdom.

Nor do I mean that what does this is a hidden act of God: as though there were the baptizer pouring water and saying words--all this visible and audible--and then inside it, underneath it, above it, God were at work. It is the unity of the church and the kingdom that is hidden. Baptism is the visible work of God that achieves the hidden work. In old fashioned sacramental terminology, the *res* of this sacrament, the holy reality, is precisely joint membership in a human community and the kingdom of God, is precisely that the church and the kingdom are mutually determinative. And what achieves this, what brings it to pass, is the visible, audible, feelable event: in old fashioned terminology, the *signum*, the sign. The rite itself is God's act to establish the ethical reality of his kingdom at the last and the eschatological reality of his church in the present.

Thus to the explanation of our now nearly millennial difficulty in realizing the unity of church and kingdom: While we have ransacked nature and supernature, metaphysics and physics, history and super-history, looking for the place where the kingdom of God and our lives in the church touch and mutually determine each other, we have been busily at work dismantling precisely those aspects of baptism that actually bring the kingdom and the church together.

Let me take the two sides again. Why are we unable to anticipate the kingdom as a real, that is to say, ethically-filled human community? Why do we always finally think of it, despite the fact that we mock such conceptions, as me by myself floating on my cloud enjoying God? I suggest it is because the great act on which we rely for our entry into the kingdom, baptism, in fact displays no ethical, no communal, no human consequences. It is performed on us, and we are relieved that we are now o.k. for the eschaton. We perform it and see it performed on our children and are relieved that now they too are o.k. for the eschaton. And both occur without any ethical or communal consequences whatever observedly taking place. What makes us o.k. for the kingdom does not in fact grant the privileges and the sustenance of the believing community. Sunday after Sunday after Sunday we see infants baptized and we know that their life in the Christian community will be no whit different the next day than it was the day before. And since this is what admits us to the kingdom, we do not and cannot conceive the kingdom as an ethical community.

That is to say, we baptize and having baptized we do not commune, do not in fact admit to the Christian community. We do not, indeed, do *anything* with respect to the Christian community by baptism. Baptism is therefore a communally empty sacrament; and that is why when we

think of it as our ticket into the kingdom we think of the kingdom as noncommunal.

Moreover, we are baptized and we baptize with no hint that momentous *ethical* burdens are thereby imposed. The baptized person is not expected to behave differently after baptism than before. For the most part that is even true of the way we do adult baptism, to say nothing of infant baptism where the infant *cannot* behave differently after than before. And since baptism is our initiation into the kingdom of God, there is no hint that membership in the kingdom of God is an ethical matter--that the kingdom will be a place where people love each other.

We are unable to anticipate the kingdom as an actual ethical community; and no quantity of verbal preaching and verbal instruction will alter that one whit so long as we baptize without granting community, and without anyone undergoing ethical catechesis in the process. It is like the Supper. We all now have learned to preach that there is the great messianic banquet coming one day. But then every so often we give a sample of the cuisine--for that is what we tell the people the Supper is, a foretaste of the messianic banquet. And this foretaste of the messianic cooking turns out to be a thimbleful of port and a bit of squashed down Wonderbread. Then we wonder why folk are not slaving for the messianic banquet--i.e., for an eternity of bad port and fish food. Well, one must agree with Shaw.

On the other side, we are unable to apprehend the moral life of the church in its freedom from the world's moral life and in its ability to dedicate itself out of sheer love to the will of God. The lack of ethical catechesis is of course relevant also here. We admit people to the church without teaching either them or their parents that they

have to live differently than they used to because this is being done. But I suspect that the difficulty is mostly that we enter the church by an act which manifestly is not a departure from or a renunciation of anything at all, which sheerly lacks the mere drama to be a plausible rite of passage from one life to the other. So long as what happens among us, by which in actual experience our communities are constituted, is that only little babies, surrounded by cooing heathen who can't find the creed in the service books, are moistened slightly on their foreheads, nobody can believe that those entering the church die to one life and are born into another one. I don't believe it; you don't believe it; nobody believes it. We say we do, but it is not possible, so long as this is how the church-community is in fact constituted before our eyes.

We need not repristinate the particular drama of patristic baptism. We may not be able to repristinate the exorcisms. We may not be able to repristinate the great cry facing the West: "Satan, I renounce you." We may not be able to repristinate the simultaneously shaming and exhilarating nakedness of the bath. But if we cannot repristinate these things, then something must replace them. And until something does replace them, no amount of catechetical instruction, no amount of preaching, no amount of Sunday School, no amount of verbalizing will persuade anybody that the church is different from the Rotary Club, because they see it demonstrated before their eyes that it is *not* different from the Rotary Club, that the way you enter the church is, if anything, slightly less rigorous than the way you enter Rotary.

Harking back to the doctrine of justification, which is what has been spooking around here the whole time, I conclude: It is the reality of the Reformation doctrine of justification that is at stake in the liturgy of baptism.