

# Percolating on Faith. Infant Baptism

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

baptism, infant baptism, baptized, christ, church, community, infants, god, resolutions, work, people, presidency, good, tradition, baptismal, theology, christianity, world, context, christian

## SPEAKERS

Tony Chvala-Smith, Carla Long, Charmaine Chvala-Smith

### **Carla Long** 00:26

Hello, and welcome to the *Project Zion Podcast*. I'm your host, Carla Long, and today you're listening to "Percolating on Faith", where we just let our little minds percolate on whatever types of stuff we want them to percolate on. And today, we're letting our minds percolate on infant baptism. Oh, before I jump into that, you're, you're here with Tony and Charmaine Chvala-Smith. Hello, Charmaine. Hello, Tony.

### **Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 00:50

Hello, Carla. Good to be with you, as always.

### **Tony Chvala-Smith** 00:53

Hi, Carla, and it's lovely to be in the percolator with you.

### **Carla Long** 00:56

Yes. I was so excited about talking about infant baptism, I forgot that you were going to actually be doing some of the talking, so I'm so glad I remembered to introduce you.

### **Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 01:06

You just keep on going. It's good. It's good.

### **Carla Long** 01:09

Yeah. Oh, yeah, I totally got this subject. I know everything about it. Interesting, because we were talking before we started the podcast and Tony and Charmaine's like, actually, Carla, what you just said is not correct. Like, okay, well, it's a good thing I'm not doing this podcast. So infant baptism was a really big conversation at World Conference and one of our resolutions and, World Conference 2023, I should say, and so, I understand that that might be one reason we're talking about this now. But Tony, Charmain, why else should we be talking about this now? Why else are we talking about it?

### **Tony Chvala-Smith** 01:41

Good question.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:41**

I mean, there's plenty of reasons to be aware of how, what Christianity looks like, you know, there's so many different forms of Christianity. And so, to be more, become more aware of the bigger Christian community is really important, and especially around those things that we have that are similar, like the sacraments, and so that's a really important piece. I think another reason that it's important that we talk about this, that, as a church, we have, we had for a very long time, a very narrow understanding of, of baptism, and, and both the purpose of baptism, I would say, and the method. And so, to become aware is really important, especially as we started changing our sacraments so that some people who've made a commitment to Christ can enter the Church simply through confirmation, rather than being rebaptized. And so, we've already made a start on all of this and, and it's only going to lead to further conversation.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 03:00**

And so, another reason why we need to talk about this, well, there's many reasons we need to talk about it, and we should say that today, this is going to be most, mostly a starter conversation, because there's so much, so much to know and learn from others. And also, Community of Christ and other Restoration traditions know really zero about infant baptism and the theology behind it. What we know are often stereotypes or misrepresentations. And so, learning, learning why others do what they do, and how it may overlap with what we do is really kind of important to our relationships with other people. So, I, we should say too that Community of Christ has been on a, on a journey, all the way back to the 1960s, when we first started inviting theologians from other denominations to help us enter the 20th century. I did say the 1960s, didn't I?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 03:52**

Starting to enter.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 03:54**

So, so, when we started, when we started inviting other theologians to help us rethink ourselves and enter the 20th century and, and imagine a viable theology that was not simply 150 year-old repetition of things we'd always said, those, those people who first helped us out were people who had been baptized as infants, right, and so, so we've been on this journey since the 1960s. I could even back it up and say, some of our best theological thinkers in the 1930s, '40s and '50s were reading, I don't know, Anglicans, who baptize infants and so on. So, we've been informed by, by aspects of the Christian tradition for a long time in Community of Christ and some of the, some of the best informers have been people who come out of traditions that baptize infants. Well, by the time we got to 2010, we had a, we were, we were at a point where we could make a little shift in our baptismal theology, and that was we, we started to recognize some Christian baptisms, i.e., those done in what is typically called a believer baptism form, meaning somebody made a decision as a person, you know, eight or older, made a decision, and then had baptism following that, and that was irregardless of form: sprinkling, pouring, immersion. By the way, the technical terms are aspersion for sprinkling, aflusion(sic) for...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 05:29**

Pouring.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 05:29

...for pouring, and immersion for, for...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 05:32

The total dip.

**Carla Long** 05:35

Those are fun to say. And speaking of total dips. Just kidding.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 05:40

So, who's gonna talk about now? Oh...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 05:42

But we should say that, that baptism does not erase our dippedness, because we have lots, every, in every tradition with, there's the recognition that you have, whatever you think baptism gives, you still have the struggle of Christian discipleship following it. So, so, so there's, so regardless of the form, there's dippedness to deal with thereafter.

**Carla Long** 06:03

There's all kinds of dippedness and, oh my gosh, I wouldn't say those words in like my normal life, because that would make me sound super smart if I could say aspersion. And what else?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 06:14

Aflusion.

**Carla Long** 06:16

Aflusion, yeah. Okay, I'm gonna, I'm gonna ask, for instance, my husband, if he would like for me to aflusion him some water to, for dinner. Continue, please.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 06:27

Well, so, so, but even, even before 2010, way back in 1994, we had changed our practice, our communion practice, so that all Christians were welcome at our table. Now, some people in church thought we kind of got this backwards, because participating in the Lord's table is, has traditionally been connected with, for the baptized. But we started the other way around. We opened the table first, and then because of the Restoration tradition, we came out of it. It's taken a long time to rethink what we mean by baptism, and by other people's baptisms, and so on.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 06:59

Right. And one of the things that I'm not sure if we're going to mention later, but I think this is a good place to insert it, is that one of the things that we had carried forward, one of those things we said for 100 years plus about ourselves, because we've talked about this many times in these podcasts about how we, we spent a great deal of time trying to convince everyone that we were the one true church.

And one of the things we held as a given was that we were the only ones with authorized priesthood. And so that's part of why baptism and confirmation weren't dealt with first, but the communion was because, because there was a sense that, well, authorized priesthood could still offer communion to people who'd been baptized in unauthorized ways. So, so but, you know, I think that, that whole, much of that, those ideals about us having the only valid priesthood have faded, as well, with the recognition that it, it is God who calls, and calls us to different kinds of leadership and that priesthood itself is not the, the end all and is not the determiner of whether or not God can work. So, I think that's been really, that's been a piece that we, I don't think we had written down to cover today...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 08:27

Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 08:27

...but it's part of why we started with communion, rather than...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 08:32

Yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 08:32

...making any changes to baptisms.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 08:34

A little easier, in some ways.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 08:36

Exactly.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 08:37

But this is all taking place as we have rethought what we mean by Restoration and, in Community of Christ for quite a few decades now, we've stopped thinking of Restoration as a, as a thing that happened once upon a time that got back an original that was, that had been destroyed. We don't think of Restoration in that terms, we, in those terms. We've come, we've come to think of Restoration as something we are called to do, not something that happened once upon a time. So, we are called to be a restoring people, a people who are trying to restore love, justice, mercy, decency, the environment and so on. It's, so there's been other shifts there too. So, the old, the old idea that we have the original restored priesthood, which has been, which was, which was unargued in the Church in 1968, that doesn't, that doesn't fit anymore, in terms of its, it's not, it's not either demonstrable or provable, right, in any way. So.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 09:33

And, and that, ultimately, it's not, it's not what defines what we're called to. And that's, I think, the thing that has changed most. It's what is it we're called to by God, not who gets to wear which hat and have which title.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 09:49

So, 2010, we made a little shift in terms of, of not rebaptizing people who had received some kind of adult or, or some kind of believer baptism, but that remained unsatisfying for lots and lots of Church people in many places. And so, thus, leading up to this most recent 2023 World Conference, a couple of resolutions were, were, were brought that wanted, that asked the presidency to do some further reflection, prayer, discernment.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 10:19

And the two resolutions, it was very interesting dynamic at Conference, because there's these two resolutions that are very similar. one has a few extra whereas in it, but they, they kind of are pointing in the same direction, both saying, we're asking the presidency to dedicate time, prayer, work, thought, all of those things, to seeing what further insight we might have about baptizing people who were, or accepting the baptism of people who were baptized before the age of eight. And...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 10:57

And so, when we, I'm sorry, go ahead.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 10:59

But it was really interesting because, and Steve even read, you know, a nice little, had a statement that's basically saying, you know, what you're asking is, is something that has already been very much on our minds, but we appreciate, you know, the resolution. And, you know, if this is passed, this resolution has passed, it, it doesn't mean that we will necessarily be changing our practices, but we want to, to continue to be open to where God might be moving with us. And in spite of saying that, and basically the vote was just, you know, do you want to have the presidency to be open to some new insights on this, people kept finding ways to talk about the issue. And so that, that was the thing that was very interesting to us, is that it was an easy vote one way or the other. It was obvious that most of the body, if not all the body, wanted the presidency to go with this, to start being more open to hearing what God, or what the community, or what the Spirit and, in the community might be pointing to. But people really wanted to talk about it too. And so, the sneaky ways that they do in, in business meetings, you know, it's like, "I'd like to make an amendment to the statement that says we want the President..." and, "I want to add (this) word in", and "because of (this and this) experience...". And so, it was obvious that many people in the Church are also wanting a conversation about this, and came up more than once. But one guy, especially, was articulate in saying, "I'm embarrassed to say this, but I don't really know anything about infant baptism. I've never really asked the, my friends or the people I know who, who are either baptized as infants, or go to a church where that's the common thing, I don't really know very much." And so that was for me, my little ding, ding, ding. You know, this is, this is something that may be very helpful for people is to understand more about why, why is their infant baptism? Where did it come from? And things like, how much of Christianity practices infant baptism? So, it's opened up, and as Tony and I've been talking about this, and putting together ideas, it's like, oh, my gosh, this could be, this could be a three-podcast series. But, we're not, we're not suggesting that. But it's, it's a rich, rich place to be exploring. And now is a good time for that.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 13:40

Well, and in terms of things people don't know is, well, number one, the New Testament is not clear on how this happens. And there's no description of an actual baptism in the New Testament. And Jesus' baptism doesn't count in the sense that it was a Jewish rite he was undergoing. But what becomes Christian baptism changes form after the resurrection, right? And so, and there are places in the New Testament that indicate whole households were baptized. And so, whole, means whole, right? And so, we can't just read back into the New Testament what we think we do, and, but then also, most Church members wouldn't know that infant baptism has been practiced in Christianity since the second and third century for sure. So, there's lots of stuff people don't know, and, and so, becoming informed about it is really important.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 14:28**

And I think, just, I'll just read a little bit. This is from the January/February *Herald*, and this is Steve Veazey. It's in one of the "Way Forward" articles that was also a video, and it's talking about some of the issues that are coming up for Conference, but I'm just going to read a little bit of it as he describes, how are we at this moment. "In anticipation of considering these resolutions at Conference, some background will be helpful. The approval of WCR1301 in 2013 requested the presidency to continue to explore questions related to baptism and membership. The presidency did this in consultation with the World Church Leadership Council and the Theology Formation Team. As requested by the resolution the presidency provided updates to the *Herald*, field discussions, and World Church Con-, World Conference reports. It is important to understand that our current policy was developed in 2010 by a joint council of the First Presidency and the Council of Twelve Apostles, with input from the World Church Leadership Council, following approval of *Doctrine and Covenants* 164. After much discussion, it was determined at that time, that Christian baptism, to be eligible for the sacrament of confirmation should have occurred with a person, when a person was at least eight years old, the church's traditional age of accountability." So that's 2010. "This is called believer's baptism. It means that individuals should choose to be baptized as a personal expression of faith, repentance and commitment to Jesus Christ. As such, baptism is a remembered event in their lives. The resolutions on baptism and membership raise the question of whether those baptized in the Christian faith before the age of eight could be confirmed without being rebaptized. That is, could people choose to affirm their previous Christian baptism, regardless of when it occurred, as their current resolve?" So basically, let people decide whether their previous baptism is representative of their current resolve as a follower of Christ, are an accepting of, of Christ? "If so, the Sacrament of Confirmation could be available to them to acknowledge the meaning of their baptism, the ministry and promise of the Holy Spirit, and their decision to express their discipleship through Community of Christ membership. In all cases, the Community of Christ understanding and practice of baptism by immersion when a person is at least eight years of age, followed by confirmation would not change," meaning that would always still remain as, as an option. "There are different strongly held views on this question throughout the international church," And I think this is really important for people to hear is that in certain parts of the church, this is more important than in others. "And the resolutions submitted about baptism and membership will provide an opportunity for World Conference delegates to explore questions, affirmations and concerns about our policy and conditions on membership. We will listen carefully to one another, our sacred story, inscription and history and the witness of the Holy Spirit as we seek guidance." And so, some of the, the sessions before Conference met in, in the legislative way, had been, that those, there's sessions to talk about those different people to discuss. But lots of people came into the conference

chamber still wanting to discuss it. And so, the, what would have, what could have been a simple vote, took us a day and a half, almost, because people were wanting to explore as much as they could, within the resolutions.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 18:11**

And try to frontload what the presidency might come up with too. There was, there was a little bit of that.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:15**

There was. It was like, okay, and we want the presidency to also consider this, and this, and this. So, it was quite, it was fascinating to watch. But there was a great hunger, actually, for wanting to talk about this, but also to learn about it. What is infant baptism?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 18:33**

Yeah, and so that, and then there was also the statement within Conference that the presidency made too, it's in the Monday summary from Conference and, where President Veazey indicates divine guidance is not just revelation, right. Divine guidance, can be the discerning work of the whole body as a prophetic people.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 18:53**

Right.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 18:53**

So, he was, he was trying to say, don't just, I think, he was trying to, don't just say, bring us back a revelation on this.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:02**

Yeah. It wasn't like, "Steve, fix this with the right, with, with something." But it was like, you know, he's saying that, the Twelve and the councils will be involved in this, as well as the church as, so, as a whole. So.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 19:17**

But in order to be involved in this, we really have to be much better informed too about the theologies behind infant baptism. Also, I mean, there's, the wider, the wider picture here behind this...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:30**

Yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 19:30**

...is, is really important, namely, Community of Christ is ecumenically engaged at the World Church level and often locally, and I mentioned earlier, our primary partners, often are churches that, that baptize infants, and we typically share some of our most important commonalities with them: trinitarian theology, responsible use of Scripture, commitment to social and ecological peace and well-being. We

share that with a number of our partners, and so that's important, important to know. And then also in the current moment...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 20:08

Oh, yeah, yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 20:09

Yeah, it really...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 20:10

In a time when, for many people, and I say young adults in particular, but it's not just young adults, when they hear the word "Christian", what comes to mind for them is judgmental nastiness, of excluding all kinds of people, and judgment on different ways of being in the world, we really need to work with other denominations who have a good will, of being a shared voice for equality and inclusion in the world. And so that means how do we understand and respect our, our, our ecumenical, our, you know, others, Christian denominations that we want to work with, and that we already do work with, and, and what their commitment to Christ looks like. So, there's, it's a important place. So, one of the things that was really curious to me, because at Conference somebody said, "Well, well, who, what," somebody down, down the row, we were delegates, somebody down the row said, "Well, who all does use infant baptism? So, it's like, well, first of all, Catholics, you know, and that's, I didn't realize, but Catholics are just over 50% of all Christians. So, 50.1% is a percentage from, I think, 2011. So, and that's not, then not talking about Eastern Orthodox churches, the Christian Orthodox churches, which are another 12%. So, you're already at 62%. These are really big groups who have always had infant baptism. And then we started looking at, so, you know, those would be in the Catholic Orthodox part of Christianity. But then we started looking at the Protestant side of Christianity, and about 60% of Protestant Christians also have infant baptism. So, there's the Reformed churches, the Anglican churches, the Methodists, the Lutherans, and some others as well. But, so, when you start looking at the whole numbers, almost 90% of all of Christianity, practices infant baptism. Only 10%, and that's mostly within some Protestant movements, don't. And so, when we're, you know, that made me think, oh, my gosh, I've been saying, "Oh, we welcome other Christians into our church through confirmation." And it's like, oh, well, no, we, we, we let this many, this tiny little number of Christians into our church by confirmation rather than rebaptism. And that was just quite sobering for me to realize how much of Christianity we've excluded. Any how, so that, that was kind of, I...

**Carla Long** 23:22

That's huge for me. You know numbers always changed my mind. Like, I'm a math girl. I love numbers, and that, that, those statistics blow my mind. 90% of Christians practice infant baptism. That is a, yeah. And really does put things into perspective that we're like, "Oh, yeah, we want anyone to come on over and be just confirmed. You don't have to be rebaptized." Well, maybe.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 23:49

Right.

**Carla Long** 23:49



That is just a fascinating statistic.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 23:51

It surprised me. But it was, but as we started, you know, I was just talking to the person down the row, it's like, well, there's this group and this group. Oh, and then there's, oh, yeah, there's this group too. Oh, and there's. You know, and it's, like, oh. So, I've been looking at the numbers, and I've looked at a couple of different organizations that have, and so these are pretty, pretty good. You know, they're pretty good numbers.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 24:16

So, I'm going to just narrow in a little bit now on the, a little bit more on the context in which we're having this discussion, and I think it's really, this is a historical piece we need to do and that's that, most of these discussions, or shall I say, arguments about the mode and form of baptism, have originated only since the 1500s, since the Protestant Reformation, and they are...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 24:39

Which, which, which is the time when there becomes two distinguishable, different, very different...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 24:45

Right.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 24:45

...groups.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 24:46

Catholics and then the various Protestant, various churches that identify as Protestant.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 24:50

Well, the Catholic and Orthodox...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 24:52

Well, yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 24:52

...Christians and...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 24:53

The Orthodox in the Eastern world and people in the West didn't know much about them.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 24:57

But, but then and then the, so this is the emergence of Protestantism as its own kind of rethinking of Christianity.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 25:05

And so, within Protestantism, though, the, most of the, the first Reformation groups still continue to practice infant baptism, it was the Anabaptists. The very name Anabaptist comes from the Greek word which means to baptize, again. It was the Anabaptist movements that said, "No, no, no, no, we, we, the only baptisms that are, that are legitimate, are adult believer baptisms." And so that's, so, in other words, the, the questioning about the form and mode of baptism emerged in a polemical context. And by polemical I mean, it's, it's a hostile setting of attack and defend, right. The word polemical comes from the Greek word pólemos, which means war. So, so the, the baptism wars started in the 1500s and the question was, well, what's the right form? And, you don't have the right form. We have the right form, and so on and so forth. And so, I have to say, I find it a little ironic that the, the origins of the baptismal wars come from a tradition that later becomes a peace tradition, right. They, they started the baptismal wars back in the 1500s. I find that kind of a curious irony. And so, let's fast forward to the 1820s and '30s, into Joseph Smith's context, the context in which he authored the *Book of Mormon*, right, which is for Community of Christ people and for other Restoration groups, *The Book of Mormon* is, is extremely polemical against infant baptism, and...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 26:36**

...and several other controversies of the age.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 26:39**

Sure. And so, the American frontier of the 1820s and '30s was the scene of this ongoing religious conflict there. And behind the conflict is the assumption that there must be only one right way, one right truth. And so, Joseph's condemnation of infant baptism is, its understanding, understandable that it's framed in that, in that context on the frontier. There has to be one right answer. Also, it's framed in the cultural-social setting of the new democratized American social experiment, where individuals and individualism is now lifted up as the way reality is, right. And so, you have to choose things for yourself. And so, nobody can choose things for you, or get, or, or infants can't be baptized because they can't choose it. That's, that's a thing that emerges on the American frontier, in that democratized experiment that we're still trying to figure out in American culture. So that was not a setting that lends itself well to understanding and respecting another's way or another's theology.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:50**

Well, and I think it is also important, and we've said this before in different conversations, but it's always important to remind ourselves that this is also 1820s, 1830s, 1840s, and beyond, an anti-Catholic time, among Protestants that's very much prejudice, much misinformation, much caricaturing of Catholicism, and so some of the things that, that we would have said as a movement as it was beginning, would have been provocative, trying to show how evil and unthinking the Catholic approach to things was.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 28:34**

Yeah, yeah. And so, for example, even in the, in the, in *The Book of Mormon*, the, the idea that, that infants who are not baptized are condemned to hell. Actually, no, no current church that baptizes as infants that I know of, including Roman Catholicism, believe that, right? So, you can't use a text from 1830 that is framed in that original polemical context to help us understand what infant baptism is and what it means today.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:58**

Because it was already biased. It was always already prejudiced.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 29:02**

So, here's the thing. In many areas of Community of Christ today, we've, we've left that polemical context far behind. It's not, it's not really our context anymore. Our context is, is, we'll say ecumenical, and postmodern. And ecumenical means that there's a desire to have a shared witness of a universal body of Christ. And a good example of that is, in our own *Doctrine & Covenants* 161, which says, "Claim your unique and sacred place," i.e., Community of Christ, "within the circle of those who call upon Jesus Christ," right. In other words, we no longer think we are the circle. We...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:39**

We're not, we're not the whole circle?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 29:39**

...we're not the whole circle. We have, we have a unique place in it, but we're not the whole circle. But then the, the postmodern kind of social-philosophical contexts we're in is that reality comes in and is understood in many forms, and there isn't one true form of reality. So that's really important in our current context. And so, theologically speaking, in our context, it's, it's just not even imaginable that God works in only one way, right.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 30:14**

And another thing that has been also feeding into this openness to look at some of our practices, is that we've been moving from a rules-based approach to things to a principle-based. So rather than, you have to follow these rules in order to do the thing right, we're saying what is it that this activity, this sacrament, whatever it is, conveys? And how do we make that the focus and not the, the specific order in which things must be done? Again, because that's all about having the one true way of being or thinking or doing sacraments. And so, you know, one of the things that we'll see in section 162, which came out in 2004, has some, it's a really good indicator of this movement. Go ahead, Tony.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 31:11**

Yeah, so section 162:2d, "You have already been told to look to the sacraments to enrich the spiritual life of the body. It is not the form of the sacrament that dispenses grace, but it is the Divine Presence that gives life." Now, that's a really important statement. The sacrament is about God before it's about form, right. It says, "Be respectful of tradition, and sensitive to one another, but do not be unduly bound by interpretations and procedures that no longer fit the needs of a worldwide church." So that's, that's from 2004.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:46**

And the last sentence...

**Tony Chvala-Smith 31:47**

The last part, "...in such matters, direction will come from those called to lead." So, some direction has come. But...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 31:55

And the body is saying...

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 31:57

We want more.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 31:57

We'd like some more.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 31:59

More please. So, the context in which we're thinking about these things theologically, is quite important. Because, you know my rule, context, context, context, whether it's in exegesis, or whether it's in church history, or so on, so. So, these are things that are kind of important to put into this whole mix, as we try to understand others' understandings of baptism, and not simply overlay what we know, or actually don't know...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 32:28

Right.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 32:28

...onto their understanding.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 32:29

I think we've discovered, as a denomination, that we have a blind spot about understanding what is infant baptism. What does it really mean to the people who practice that? And, and is it so foreign, really? So that's part of what we want, want to explore?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 32:47

And I don't know about you, Carla, but I hate it when people say, "I'm going to tell you who you are."

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 32:54

Yeah. So, we don't want to do that to other people, other denominations saying, "Well, I know what you believe about infant baptism," when we clearly do not, so.

**Carla Long** 33:03

Yes, I mean, like, what I've always grown up, believing is something that you've already debunked, you know, I mean, it's, it's, it was simply not true. And so, like, it was just another way of saying, of drawing the line in the sand and saying, I'm right, and I'm on this side, and the way we do it, is the best. And the way you do it is, is not great, and not of God. It's just another way of putting ourselves above others, which we've tried so hard not to do in the past. It's just this one, it just seemed to be inherited, and we just like, continued to believe it, because we didn't, we didn't know any better.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 33:35

And I do think it's, you know, we inherited it, even back at the formation when, when the Church was being formed. And we're never, we're not circumspect about what we were taking in. And, you know, thankfully, we've, we have good, good Christian neighbors within the denominational world, where, who are our patient with us and want us to understand them as much as we want them to understand us.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 34:06

And I think that the good news in there, actually, is that, you know, if you, if you take the view from 30,000 feet, in Community of Christ theology, we want baptism and actual discipleship to be really connected.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 34:17

Connected, yeah.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 34:18

But when you, when you talk to people in other traditions, they do too. And, and the issue of timing is more or less irrelevant to the question of baptism and, and effective discipleship. We'll say more about that in a little bit, so. So, all right, so this is interesting. This, the timing of this is kind of interesting, because, because I was just recently at a National Council of Churches Faith and Order meeting in Washington, D.C., and before I left, somebody special, whom I'm sitting next to right now, gave me an assignment.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 34:53

Did you explain what the NCC?

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 34:54

National Council of Churches of Christ. It's a, it's the largest American, or U.S. ecumenical, ecumenical...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 35:03

Organization.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 35:03

...organization. Community of Christ has been a full member since, since 2010. And we have people who sit on, who work on the steering committee that, I happen to be on what's called the Faith and Order convenient table, where we deal with questions of doctrine and theology. And, and currently we are working on a book about racism and, and how to equip the church, meaning the whole church, to effectively deal better, to deal better with racism. But Charmaine's assignment to me before I left for the meeting was, can you make some time to talk with different people there about their understanding of infant baptism, right? So...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 35:41

From their tradition.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 35:42

...from their tradition, right. And so, I was able to sneak in a few, a few of those. They were actually, were kind of fun conversations, but just, I was able to chat with, with three of my colleagues there, and got some fascinating stuff. So just, this is just, and this needs to be further augmented by careful study of, of their own material, but here's what, so the, the Presbyterian-, a representative of the Presbyterian Church, the United Presbyterian Church, USA, she insisted that baptism, infant baptism, that the symbol for us is that grace is at work in people before they ever choose or decide anything, right. I, the word there is prevenient grace. Great, God's, God is already active at work in people before they choose something. And...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 36:31**

How would they even know that they wanted to choose baptism? That's a sign that, that God's at work already.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 36:37**

God is always acting prior to our conscious choices. And I think there's, there's lots of experience that Community of Christ people will share. I've heard people say in Community of Christ, "You know, now, as I look back, you know, before I got active in the church, and before I was baptized, I can look back and see, God was leading me in that direction." Well, bingo. That's exactly what the Presbyterian minister was saying. And thus, God's, God's grace is effective, even prior to when an infant is baptized. It, it, it then places them in a context in which God's grace will further be able to work through the community to help shape them in a Christian direction. And I did a quick look on the PCUSA website just on, on baptism, and they, Presbyterians, "Describe baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace made by God through Jesus Christ and extended to us. Infant baptism expresses that it is God who chooses us for faith, discipleship and salvation. Without God, we have no power to claim these things for ourselves." And that actually experientially is born out again and again in people's expressions. I've heard it so many times. "We affirm that people come to faith at different stages in life, and recognize that baptism of older believers is an equally valid expression of the sacrament." And then in the Presbyterian Church, at least the PCUSA, you don't have to be rebaptized if you were previously baptized. "The PCUSA recognizes all baptisms with water, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, administered by their Christian churches." So, remember your baptism and be thankful that this is on their websites. It's really cool. So that's going to come back again and again in different denominations' statements. That is, baptism in the name of the Trinity is the, the uniting factor here.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:27**

So, what would they describe as being, what's happening for the child as they, as they are baptized? Or why, why a child, why an infant rather than waiting?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 38:40**

Yeah, because this is the this is the community, the parents and the community, expressing their wish, their desire for the child to be raised in a Christian environment and to be, to be incorporated into Christ right from the start. And so that's one of the ways they would, they would think about that. And that's common across people who practice infant baptism.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:59**

It was something I was reading as far as the Orthodox Christians as well, Eastern Orthodoxy, that in the same way that circumcision was a sign in the Old Testament of being, of entering into the community, that in early Christianity, meaning second, third, fourth century, by which time infant baptism was normative, early Christianity saw baptism of infants as a recognition that they are, they are part of the covenant, the Christian covenant, in, by, and so their baptism is a way in which the community recognizes that they are part of this covenant with God through Christ. So, it, so anyhow, it's a, very much like, you know, the circumcision that would have been done for males at the eight days old, kind of thing. So, it's, it's this ongoing covenantal theology that is at work that the community that God has created, as far as Christians go, in Christ, these infants are, they are already part of the community, but it's recognizing them as part of the covenant, so. I think that's a really interesting thing. And that's, and as we're, been reading and studying, it's like, that's been part of the understanding of it way, way, way back to the fourth and fifth century.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 40:32**

If a Community of Christ person were to say, "Well, yeah, but we bless infants, we don't baptize them." One could ask the, the counter question, but did the infant choose to be blessed, right? And of course not. Parents, parents take the infant who cannot choose yet, desiring the blessings of community right from the start, so, so we have to be careful again, and again, not to way overplay the choice card on this. So, I talked to a Roman Catholic representative at NCC and we, our conversation was much briefer. But one of the things he's, one of the things he's pointed out is that in, in baptism, the real actor is not the priest, but Christ, right. So, he said that we, in Catholic circles, we insist that the baptismal formula be, "I baptize you, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, the Holy Spirit." And the I is not the priest. It's Christ himself, who's doing the baptizing. In other words, it's a divine action. And I have a, a Methodist friend from years ago, from seminary, who said that, you know, he was being pushed on by people who said, "You're not really baptized," and he came to realize himself that God baptized me really, right. It was, it was a divine action. And then if you check the Catechism of the Catholic Church out, it says that grace, grace is imparted at baptism, but in order for that grace to unfold, it takes the work of the whole community, right. So, I think that's really, really interesting, too. It's not individualistic.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 42:04**

Right, and within Catholicism, there's intentional ways of that to unfold through Catechism classes, and then through confirmation later. It's still as children, but, but it's confirmation as being an ongoing, ways of letting this grace have room to grow and deepen.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 42:28**

And then I had a conversation with an ELCA, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America pastor, who's on NCC. This, this was particularly fascinating to me. He said, "Look, baptism is a single act, extended through time." So, he said, "Baptism begins in infancy. It continues through to confirmation and first communion, when the child is older, and extends all the way through life until death where it is completed." In other words, baptism is not a thing that happened once upon a time. It, baptism initiates you into a process in which baptism continues throughout your life, and it's completed at death, when, at least in the ELCA tradition, that's one of the few times liturgically when the Pascall, or Easter candle is lit. It's lit at the death of somebody, because their baptism is now complete, and they are now, they now enter into the risen Christ, the life of the risen Christ. I thought that was absolutely beautiful.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:27**

It's kind of like baptism is a time-released element throughout our lives,

**Tony Chvala-Smith 43:33**

Yeah, yeah. That's a good way to put it. And the, the Pascall candle at, at death signifies that that's the end of the baptismal journey. And that's, that's fascinating to me. And I know that Martin Luther taught that baptism is renewed every day, when you, you are, you are called to renew your baptism each day, by...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:53**

By remembering it.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 43:54**

...by remembering it, by, by repenting, by living within and for the community, and so on. So, look, these are, these are just starters on how infant baptism is, is understood. There are analogies in Community of Christ experience. One of the things that I'm, I'm coming to understand about all this, is that sacraments are symbols, right. And whenever I say symbol, I don't mean merely a symbol or just a symbol, it's a big word for me, so. And so, a side note about symbols and the mysteries they point to, is that if, if a, if they ever had only one meaning, they would be neither true symbols nor true mysteries, right. And so, the idea that, somehow, we have to reduce the meaning of baptism to one thing, robs it of its sacramental and symbolic significance. A symbol, what makes a symbol rich and full is that it simultaneously means many different things that are related to each other. So, I think that's, kind of a, that's, that's been a helpful thing for me to recognize as we are in this ongoing journey of trying to understand the traditions of others. So, coming down to the end here, and like we said, there's so much more that needs to be said, we just can't do it all.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:14**

We started writing ideas down and came up with three or four pages, so we're trimming.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 45:21**

So, this is not...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 45:21**

...highlighting here.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 45:23**

...Charmaine, Tony and Carla's long, excellent, podcast adventure. We don't, we don't want it to be like that, but, you know, it's just some focusing questions that we need to be asking in the church, right. And maybe one is, like, why is it so hard for us to let other Christian traditions speak for themselves, and so much easier to say what we think they believe? That's been a bad habit we've had. Why is that always easier, right. And then another question, does the mode and timing affect baptism significance? Well, obviously, no, because aren't there plenty of Community of Christ people who were baptized, they chose it at age eight, or nine or 10, but they didn't really act on the commitment until they were 30, 50



70? And they were like, yeah, I was baptized a long time ago. I've kind of forgot about that, but I'm now responding to it. Well, it's, well, that's not unlike infant baptism and really choosing to make it effective in your life later.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:22**

But other things that we need to kind of think about are, you know, why have baptismal practices developed in the first place, you know, in the early centuries? And then, why have they varied in different, in different Christian groups? And what is a sacrament? I mean, this is a great place to start looking at what makes something a sacrament. So, there's those, those questions that we need to ask as we go as well.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 46:49**

And another question is, when it, when it comes to faith in Christ, what do we mean by choosing it, right? That's, we use that kind of language, and yet faith is often bigger than a mere choice, right. It's something that awakens in us. It's something that hits us, it grasps us. It's, it can't be reduced to choice, but also, so, you know, an eight year-old who grows up among Community of Christ people, and knows only Community of Christ stuff, when they choose to be baptized, well...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:24**

Do they know what the other choices are?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 47:26**

That's right. What, what else?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:29**

Are they just simply been socialized into thinking, well, this is what you do when you're eight, you know.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 47:33**

What else would they have chosen, right?

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:35**

Right.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 47:36**

The, the eight year-old is not going to say, "Mom and Dad, I've just explored the Episcopalian Church and I prefer to be baptized there." There not going to say that, right, so. And it's, so.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:45**

So, are they really choosing, or, you know, if we're talking about believer's baptism, then? So that, it's kind of important.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 47:54**

Yeah. Oh, go ahead, Charmaine. I mean...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 47:55**

I was just gonna say, you know, there's, there's all these questions about what makes a baptism effective, you know, as well, because if we're, if we have inadvertently or inherently criticized other baptisms, what is it that we are saying makes a baptism effective? You know, is it the beliefs of the community or the minister? Well, you know, I know, I know some functional atheists in Community of Christ who have baptized people. Does that mean it's not effective if their beliefs aren't aligned properly? Is it the amount of water? Well, there's some people who would say, you know, the only way is, the only way it can count, or we used to say this as a, as a denomination is if there's enough water for you to be fully submerged, not for long, but you do need to go under, the whole dipping thing. So, is it the person who's performing the rite, that they're properly authorized? Is that what makes baptism effective? Is it the age of the person? Is it what that person might believe happens in the rite? Does, does it change the person who is being baptized? Is it the words? Do you have to have the right words in order for, what baptism stand for, stands for to be effective? So, there's a lot of questions, you know. Is it the willingness of the person to ask for baptism, or is it the community's willingness to support the individual and family? It's, so there's just so many questions that are associated with our understanding of, what is baptism?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 49:49**

And Carla, now I have a, now I have a trick question for you too, that's related to these. So, so, alright, so, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was Lutheran, and Oscar Romero, who is now St. Oscar Romero, was Roman Catholic. Both of them were baptized as infants, and you know something about both of them, but Brigham Young was baptized as an adult by immersion, in a tradition that taught that only his baptism counted. And so, I have a question for you, Carla. Who of those would you rather have teach the youth group about discipleship?

**Carla Long 50:21**

I'm gonna go ahead and plead the fifth on that one. It's an excellent point and well taken, well taken.

**Tony Chvala-Smith 50:31**

So, in other words, form does not necessarily indicate proper content, right. In other words, you can't just, they're not just automatically linked. And so, so.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 50:43**

And always, the question is, what is God's role in baptism? And who is, who is it that's making this rite meaningful? And I think that's a place that we perhaps have not explored very much, especially when we get into these conversations about method, and timing, and all of that kind of thing. It's like, wait a minute, what is it that God is trying to do? What is it that Christ, how is Christ trying to be present? What is, how is the Spirit wanting to move in this sacrament?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 51:18**

So, I think, Charmaine, we've pretty much worked through what we have today, because, like I said, we don't want this to be a long, excellent adventure. It's just a teaser, sort of, to get us get people thinking about infant baptism and recognizing we have lots to learn, as a church, about the theologies behind it, and what it means in those communities. So yeah.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 51:36**

And it really did take me back to Steve's words in the January/February *Herald* article, yeah, where, where he says, "The resolutions on baptism and membership raise the question of whether those baptized in the Christian faith before the age of eight, could be confirmed without being rebaptized. That is, could people choose to affirm their previous Christian baptism, regardless of when it occurred, as their current resolve?" And, because what that allows is for the person to determine whether or not their baptism has been effective in leading them to Christ. I mean, they want to be involved in our church. Well, I'd say, God's been at work in the steps, previous steps that they've taken. And so, I think that's kind of an interesting way of giving freedom for the person to determine whether they would claim fully, their, their first baptism as their first step on this journey. And, I know, I'm not sure if that's exactly where he would, would want to end up, or go, but I, that was a nice, I liked the way he worded that, and it's, and it fits. It fits for us as a church, of trusting that the Spirit's at work in all kinds of ways and places, and that we, that's what we need to be attentive to, not the exterior rules or, or prejudices that we may have, between each other within Christianity. Any how, some places to go with it.

**Carla Long 53:28**

Super fascinating you two. Just, I mean, I've learned so much. You know, there are just some, some really big things that stick out to me. And, and one of those is that, you know, like, we thought that we had, and I still think even now, we know we're not the one true church, so on and so forth, but I still think even now, that we believe that a believer's baptism is still the best, you know, in Community of Christ. But what you're saying is, you know, in Catholicism, and ECLA, and ELCA, I mean, so on and so forth, they have beautiful reasons for believing why they believe. This is not something that they just do. This is something well thought out. This is solid theological knowledge that they have behind this. So, I mean it...

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 54:10**

And there's a spiritual depth.

**Carla Long 53:11**

A huge spiritual depth that we thought that we had maybe the cornerstone on, even now, honestly, that perhaps we don't. And so, I think it's super important that you've lifted up all those things. And the very fact that 90% of Christians practice infant baptism, and were a part of the 10% that do not, that speaks volumes to me as well, volumes.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith 54:36**

Yeah, there's, there's a lot to be considered there.

**Carla Long 54:40**

Well, thank you so much for sharing all of that. Is there any closing thoughts that you have before we sign off?

**Tony Chvala-Smith 54:46**

Only thing I can, I can add is that, for the sake of the reign of God, and moving toward Jesus the Peaceful One, as we say is our, our journey right now in Community of Christ, we have to, we have to open ourselves to thinking very deeply, and very compassionately, and very openly towards the practices of others. There's no longer a place for polemics, especially in, especially in a world that is so endangered as ours is. And, hey, we need all, all the camaraderie and help we can get, right, so.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 55:19

And I think what I would add is, or maybe reiterate, is simply the idea that part of our role, individually as Christians but then as a community as well, is to try to discern where God is at work, and to join our efforts with what God is doing. And, so I would, I encourage all of us and those who are listening to, to uphold the Church leaders in prayer as they consider this. And individually, that we be open to where God may be working within the Church and outside of the Church, and see what seems appropriate ways of moving forward, so. That's, I think, I think the possibilities, and we're in a time of possibilities, are always before us, and to not assume, like you said, Carla, that we have all the answers, and we always have had. That's part of the beauty of the last few decades.

**Tony Chvala-Smith** 56:27

We have good potlucks, but not all the answers.

**Carla Long** 56:30

Amen. Amen. Well, thank you so much, Tony and Charmaine, for sharing that with us. And I know that you had to like really limit yourself down, which is probably the hardest thing you've done in a long time. It's like, not saying as much as you want to say, because we want, we don't want this podcast to be three hours. So, thank you so much for sharing your knowledge with us. Thank you so much for all the wonderful things you gave us to think about, and the good questions you had at the end. Hopefully, our listeners and I will continue to think about those. So, I'm really grateful. Thanks so much.

**Charmaine Chvala-Smith** 57:00

Thank you.