

BAPTISM

Christinah Cross

The first time I remember seeing a baptism was at a tiny Southern Baptist chapel in Chiefland, Florida. All dolled up in my frilly pastel dress, white buckled shoes, and lacy socks, my brother and I walked across the hot parking lot from Grandma's black Mazda truck into the homey brick chapel, each holding a finger of our grandmother's hand. She had pressed her best dress so stiff she may as well have washed it in pure starch. My little brother's six-year-old indoctrinated Southern etiquette displayed itself proudly—church was not a regular outing, and he didn't mind being suited up and shown off. Plenty of others coming into the chapel were in their Sunday best, most of whom gave the air of being "regulars," but medleys of worn denim mixed with the collared shirts and skirts didn't seem out-of-place.

We mounted the steps, crossed the threshold, and adjusted our eyes to the dark and our damp skin to the blasting air conditioning. As we filed into the congregation, Grandma's finger tugged me gently because I kept getting distracted by bright stained-glass windows and forgetting to move. After we sat down, the preacher started in on his sermon and someone passed around the collection plate. We may also have done what I only knew as the bread-and-water thing. (I couldn't remember which churches we had been to that did that, but I liked it—if for no other reason than that it broke up the monotony.) But what I really remember is the baptism.

Sometime during the meeting, the preacher announced that we had a new brother who was being baptized and coming to Jesus. Behind the

pulpit, front and center of the chapel, he dramatically pushed back a glass door to expose the font, which looked to me like a tall bathtub. A young, clean-cut man waited in the water. Smiling, he held out his hand to help another man descend the steps. This other man was older, bearded, and gruff, certainly not dressed for the occasion of coming to Jesus. When the two men met, the younger man said something (unintelligible from where I sat) and quickly dunked the older man under the water. When the older man came back up, he was sopping wet but grinning. He had looked a little nervous before, but now he appeared nothing short of triumphant, as though he had left everything sad or scary in the water. We all clapped and cheered for our new brother.

All of a sudden, I wanted that.



For Southern Baptists, as for many Protestant Christians, baptism is a deliberate act of faith, a declaration to the world of belief in Jesus Christ. As such, you are probably more likely to see an adult baptism at a Baptist church than the baptism of a child. Baptism doesn't "save," but it shows that the person has been saved by accepting the Savior.

For Baptists, baptism is highly symbolic. It must be done by immersion because it represents the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as the death of your life as a sinner and the birth of your new life as a follower of Christ. It also makes you a member of the church, although the spiritual significance of the ordinance is emphasized much more than is entrance into the church, because nothing about the church is considered necessary for salvation. It's just a community of believers.

Granted, I couldn't have told you any of that at eight years old. But I could have told you that this baptized man looked newly born, he had come into a community, and he believed.



I leaned over excitedly and whispered, “Grandma? Are we going do that?”

She paused. Carefully, she replied, “Umm . . . not this time.”

“Can I, though?”

“Maybe.”

“When?”

“We’ll talk about it later, okay, baby?”

I assumed “later” meant Grandma had politely dismissed my request, but I soon found out that it hadn’t been ignored. My grandmother, who viewed her precious grandbabies as spiritual protégés, was always eager to encourage (but not force) any religious inclination. She was excited when I wanted to attend church, pray, or hear stories of Jesus; my newfound desire for baptism thrilled her. As I’m sure Grandma anticipated, however, my mother was considerably less enthusiastic. She wasn’t strictly opposed, but she was wary of eight-year-olds making decisions of eternal magnitude, especially *her* eight-year-old. But as a single mother working sixty hours a week as a restaurant manager, weekends being their busiest times, she had to entrust Sunday activities to her mother, to whom she gave permission to take me to a few different churches until we found something that satisfied me (or that satisfied her). The only parameters were to stay away from Catholics and Mormons. Only babies could be baptized as Catholics (at least she thought so). And Mormons? Been there, done that.

My mother and grandmother, unknown to me at the time, were both inactive Mormons. Recently the LDS Church has replaced the term “inactive” with “less active,” but for my mother, who smoked several cigarettes a day and went to bed with a Jack Daniels, and my grandmother who had developed a taste for cigars and wine much too expensive for my mother’s income, a point causing frequent household tension, I don’t feel like “less active” quite cut it. In fact, Christianity as a whole may actually have been debatable for my mother. Grandma, however, wasn’t about to take me anywhere that wasn’t Christian.

Grandma was by far the most qualified candidate in our family to take me church-hopping and baptism-shopping. She had always been the most spiritually inclined, and I had always thought of her as a “church-person.” She was a big, round woman with big, kinky black hair, big purple-tinted glasses, and a big heavy pocketbook, and she had more than enough spirit to fill that frame. The few times we had gone to church, she had been the one to take us and she seemed to know everybody there, which was especially impressive considering we didn’t always attend the same place. If she had had her way, I probably would’ve been baptized in all of them, too.

I almost wonder if her spirit was just too big for one church to hold it. She kept a large-printed, worn red-letter edition Bible with her, she zealously watched Benny Hinn and other shouting Pentecostal-style TV preachers who shoved people down into the water of baptism to make them “whole,” and she prayed in tongues. My favorite part of Grandma’s “churchy-ness” was her singing. Her big, low voice gave a certain depth to the hymns, especially the ones she learned in her intermittent affairs with local African-American evangelical denominations. I had experienced a couple of these vibrant services myself. I took pleasure in being the only white people in the room, feeling somehow unique. I adored the color—in paper fans, in hats, in dresses, in people. We would stand for almost the entire service, singing and clapping to the music of the band. Many of the hymns, the ones I can still hear Grandma singing, had been handed down since before the Civil War. They rang out freedom and victory through Jesus. I didn’t know what “victory in Jesus” was, but I liked it.

For these believers, coming to Jesus was a victory over death and sin, and baptism was the most fitting celebration. It meant that you had won your soul from the devil and were giving it to Jesus. An epic fight occurring in each soul calls for a kind of fervor in religious meetings that many of us can’t keep up with. The fervor comes because not only do you have the opportunity to rejoice over the souls that have been

saved, but you never know what worship session is going to spark the saving of another soul.

Anyway, as directed, we visited several churches, although I don't now remember exactly which. I also don't know why Grandma walked us into the Orange Park First Ward, Jacksonville Stake Latter-day Saint sacrament meeting a few weeks after her conversation with my mother. Whether out of sheer defiance or latent guilt for forsaking a faith she had once embraced, we found ourselves in a Mormon chapel that seemed vaguely familiar to me. (As it turns out we had attended an LDS meeting once or twice in Chiefland.) Compared to the stained-glass Baptist windows or the vibrant color of other places we'd been, this building suffered a disappointing lack of color. For once Grandma didn't already know everyone; I could tell she was slightly uncomfortable by the sugary, much more "milk-and-cookies grandma" tone she assumed when anyone welcomed us. The first of those welcomers was a small, elderly woman who greeted us and introduced herself as Sister White. I could remember that because her hair was as white as the beautiful snow I'd only ever seen in Christmas movies.

For most of sacrament meeting, I stared at the ceiling. The hanging lights formed rectangular prisms gathered at a point, and I imagined them to be giant crayons. Mentally I pulled one down, turned it around so that the point faced upward, and traced the bold-lettered word CHURCH across the chapel ceiling. Once I satisfied myself tracing with giant light fixture crayons, I began flipping through the hymnbook to find any songs I might know. I recognized "How Great Thou Art" so I read it a few times over, picturing stars and rolling thunder. There was no baptism, but we did do the bread-and-water thing.

Three hours of church did not faze my enthusiasm; I had always thought church ended too quickly. After sacrament meeting, Sister White led me to meet the other Primary kids. We sang more songs and played a few games. Then a pretty lady with short black hair just happened to teach us a lesson about baptism. It annoyed me that the rambunctious

boys in my class weren't as enthralled by the subject as I was, but I focused on the teacher.

"Who here has been baptized?" she asked. "Raise your hands. What was it like? How did you feel?"

I looked around, jealous of the raised hands and proud faces. I was unimpressed by the vague and almost apathetic descriptions of baptism from the other children, whose sentiments seemed quite inadequate as I remembered the beaming smile of the bearded man who came to Jesus in that Baptist church. I forgot my jealousy and judgment of the other children in time to get a Twizzler and make the small trek to a Sunday School classroom, where I busied myself making a new friend and finding out how "Shad-rack, Me-shack, and Ab-indigo" were rescued from fire.

That night when my mother came home from work, Grandma told her we'd be having the missionaries over later in the week. My mother's raised eyebrow sufficed to communicate her incredulity; Grandma apologetically explained that Sister White, who had talked to her all through Relief Society, had introduced her to the nice elders and Grandma simply couldn't get out of an appointment without being rude. (We found out many years later from one of those missionaries that Grandma had contacted them directly. I'd like to ask her what prompted her to do so, but once she tells a story she becomes so deeply convinced of it that reality is unrecoverable.)

My mother couldn't cancel the appointment or turn the missionaries away either, so come they did. And they came again and again. I loved having the elders over. I grew excited just cleaning up the living room in preparation, and if they ran late I worried that they would forget about us. They played games with us, told cool stories, showed off, and let us wear their nametags and backpacks. When they taught, I felt like I, the stringy-haired girl in her pink cotton pajamas, held the full attention of two grown-ups. They used a coloring book version of the discussions for kids, which they eventually gave up on because it couldn't handle the

questions my brother and I asked them. (I still appreciated the coloring book though.)

And I did ask a lot of questions. For example, I wasn't as impressed as I think I was supposed to be when they told me "families can be together forever" in heaven. I had already figured that, because why else would anybody want to go to there? Instead, the topic only sparked questions about mommies and daddies who got divorced. My mother stayed busy in the kitchen most of the time the missionaries visited—close enough to supervise the conversation without being part of it. I honestly don't remember how the missionaries answered my question about divorce, or any of my other questions for that matter. But I do remember that my mother came quietly into the room and sat down on the couch.

We talked about baptism, too. I bragged that I had seen a baptism and I wanted to be baptized. To explain the concept of priesthood authority and its necessity for baptism, Elder Hann painted the picture of a speeding car pulled over by an ice cream truck with a siren, and the ice cream man handing the speeder a ticket. I thought the analogy was hilarious, but then again I found everything funny in his Australian accent.

The whole thing made sense to me. I figured that if the Mormons were the only church that had gotten it right, I wanted to be baptized there. It seemed that baptism was the same for Mormons as it was for everybody else I knew. The only major difference was that it felt less like the victorious end of a fight and more like the beginning of . . . what, I didn't yet know. Baptism for Mormons, like Baptists and evangelicals, qualified you for membership in the church and showed your belief in, and obedience to, Jesus Christ. It also served as a cleansing from sin and put you in a lifelong covenant with God, to be remembered during the sacrament (the bread-and-water thing) every week for the rest of your life.

I found out that you only have to be eight years old to be baptized, so I felt more than ready. I liked church. I liked the missionaries. I liked my illustrated *Book of Mormon Stories* that I read almost all in one night when Bryan had scarlet fever and we were stuck at the hospital. (Abinadi,

my favorite hero, was not rescued from the fire like Shadrach Meshach, and Abednego, and that disappointed expectation was traumatizing for a few years.) I especially liked how nobody fought on the nights the missionaries came over and my mother smiled more.

If baptism, in at least some of the senses I then understood it, could happen to a home, it was happening to mine. The same two missionaries visited us weekly for eight or nine months. At the time, we didn't appreciate how long that was, either in terms of missionary transfers or in terms of missionary patience. I waited to be baptized.

Scripturally, things end poorly for those who seek "a sign," but God must have deemed my family stubborn enough to need one. One night we had a whole lesson with the elders on fasting. Eager to try a new challenge from the elders, Bryan and I wondered out loud what we could fast for. My mother worked too hard keeping food in the refrigerator to support skipping meals, but she agreed we could try fasting for just one lunch. Brother Scurti, the stout, warm old man who accompanied the missionaries most nights they visited us, spoke up from the other end of the plushy blue couch.

"What if you fasted and asked Heavenly Father to find your mother a job that lets her stay home on Sundays? Then she could come to church with you."

"And with the same pay and benefits," my mother added politely, but cynically.

"Yes," he smiled, pretending not to catch the skepticism, "why don't you fast for that?"

Besides working long hours, my mother also took night classes to earn her degree. Two weeks after our fasting experiment, a classmate spontaneously asked her if she would be interested in a recently opened management position. His company offered the same pay and benefits as her current job, and a consistent schedule Monday–Friday and every other Saturday. My mother stopped waiting for my baptism phase to pass. She began trying to re-discover the whole Mormon thing herself,

because she wasn't about to do anything halfway. And one day she told me I could be baptized.

We set the date for November 22nd. My birthday had passed and I was no longer eight, but I didn't stay disappointed by that very long. I was anxious when I found out there was an interview—I had never been interviewed for anything before—but I was pleased with myself when I found it quite easy to pass. I counted down the days until the 22nd, which fell on a Saturday night. I wore a white frilly dress and felt beautiful. When we entered the now-familiar beige building, Elder Hann showed me the font. His stunning white suit somehow reminded me of bright colored hats and stained glass windows. I leaned my ear up against the cool accordion door and ecstatically reported that I could hear water running behind it. That was *my* water.

Everyone was there—Mommy, Bryan, my aunt and baby cousin, my beaming Grandma; my Primary teachers and the other kids in my Sunday School class; my best friend from school and her mother. (I had also invited my Irish Catholic third-grade teacher, who had declined politely.) We began the ceremony by singing “I Am a Child of God” and Bryan gave the opening prayer. (I had dictated my own program and wanted to make sure everyone got to participate). I had assigned my mother to give a talk on baptism, which she did.

Brother Scurti had teased that if I was good, the water would be warm. I must have been good that day, because descending the steps to the font felt like stepping into a ready-made bath. Elder Hann reminded me where to hold his wrist so I could pinch my nose, which I had rehearsed because I was terrified of inhaling water. He leaned down and asked me to remind him of my middle name. By this point, the silence in the room compelled me to whisper, “Paige.” He stood up straight and said, with an unfamiliar authority but a familiar Brisbane edge, “Christinah Paige Cross . . .” I felt my heart pound faster through the brief, deliberate prayer. I shut my eyes tight, death-gripped my nose, and fell back.

The warm water engulfed my small body, and the rush of being pulled back up was so exhilarating that I almost wished I could do it again.

Someone heard my wish. As the first cold draft hit my dripping face and I turned to leave, Elder Hann's grasp on my arm tightened. "Wait, Christinah!" He was wearing the kind of smile that replaces a laugh in a reverent setting. "We get to do it again!" My toe had popped up out of the water, so I hadn't been fully immersed. We needed to repeat the ordinance, which might have annoyed another missionary or embarrassed another child. But I was delighted. How many people got to be baptized twice? Elder Hann again stood up straight and again assumed the purposeful tone. "Christinah Paige Cross . . ." Eyes closed, nose gripped, warmth, rush, air . . .

He was actually snickering now. "We get to do it a *third* time!" Wow, was I lucky! This time, he secured both my feet under one of his, bent and dunked me as far as I could go, and I'm pretty sure he held me there an extra few seconds. When I finally left the font, I beamed with pride. All I wanted was to be baptized once, and I got to do it three times. Slowly ascending the slippery steps to the bathroom where my mother and grandmother waited for me, I thought how I was clean and perfect three times over. This must be what it feels like to come to Jesus.



An individual's journey to any kind of spiritual rebirth can take countless forms, and I don't think it ever happens in isolation. My Grandma's big church-person spirit, with her red-lettered Bible, praying in tongues, and deep-toned folk hymns nurtured in me a genuine, sometimes even overwhelming, excitement about all things God. That man who was baptized that day in a Southern Baptist chapel in Chiefland showed me the courage and faith made possible by a spiritual community. Gospel-singing evangelicals taught me to celebrate spiritual victories. My mother taught me the importance of asking questions, and two teenage boys

in ties gave me a few of the answers. Without these influences, I may never have “come to Jesus” in quite the way I did, culminating in that exhilarating rush of warm water for the third time. I wouldn’t trade my journey for anyone else’s. In the early days of the Church, Saints were often re-baptized to affirm their commitment to God. Now we just use the sacrament. Doctrinally speaking, it’s the same thing, but while I still like the bread-and-water thing, I confess I love being baptized for the dead in the temple. It never gets old. I don’t do it as often as I did through my teen years, now spending more time on other temple ordinances. Those ceremonies are always special . . . but I do like being baptized.