

Notes for a Baby Book
Mark 10:13-16

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People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them. . . . And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them. Mk. 10:13a, 16

The events of a baby's first year are often memorialized in a baby book. New parents write of their little one's first tooth, first step, first word, favorite food, favorite toy, and so on.

A portion of Mark's record in his tenth chapter is a kind of baby book entry. Those parents who brought their infants (the Greek is *paidia*) to Jesus that day had much to write about that night. They had taken their little ones to Jesus, but the disciples tried to stop them, keeping them and their kids far from the rope line. Jesus, however, would have none of that! He took the infants in his arms and he spoke words of blessing over them. Would that we knew what he said.

Absent knowing that, we can wonder what should be written in a baby book now about the day of a baby's baptism.¹ I can think of three notes for a baby book.²

Something happened before the baptism took place.

Christian baptism begins not in the present with a human profession of faith, whether by the parents or by the candidate himself or herself in the case of adult baptism. Christian baptism begins way back in the past with a decisive act of God. At the baptismal font we proclaim that something has happened: the decisive moment of history has occurred.

The decisive moment actually happened outside history in the heart and the mind of God. The famous verse John 3:16 begins to point to it: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son." The decisive action of God that is the turning point of history is God's decision to love, a decision that sent everything in motion. The revelation of this decisive act of God takes place in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Taken together the decisive action and the revelation are like a continental divide. If you are traveling I-90 to the west, just east of Butte, MT, you will come to a sign marking the continental divide. Water that falls to the one side of it flows down to the Missouri River; water that falls on the other flows to the Pacific. In reading your New Testament, you come across signs marking the continental divide in the heart of God.

1 Peter knows all about it. "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope . . ." (1 Pet. 1:3) "Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have

¹ Anna Elizabeth Yurs was baptized the morning this sermon was preached.

² This sermon draws upon Oscar Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, tr. by J. K. S. Reid (London: SCM Press, 1950), p. 48.

received mercy.” (1 Pet. 2:10) Paul knows all about it. “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” (Rom. 5:8) “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else is all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Rom. 8:38-39). The writer of Ephesians knows all about it, too. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” (Eph. 2:13)

The thing – you see – has already been decided. It’s a continental divide. The decision, the decisive action, happened long before you were baptized, long before you were born. Something happened before the baptism took place. Write that in the baby book.

Something happened during the baptism.

I wonder if you ever fooled around with disappearing ink when you were a kid. I seem to remember having some that you could use to write on a page and nothing would show up until you wet the page a little bit. And then the dampened page would reveal what was written there.

At baptism, the outward and visible sign of water reveals a truth that was written long beforehand. Water baptism does not cause a person’s name to be written in some Book of Life, as if God has to wait until we use the right amount of water, the right words, and the right ceremony before God will begin to love us. No, water baptism does not cause a person’s name to be written in the Book of Life, but it is a sign the person’s name is written in the Book of Life.

One of my Scottish preaching heroes, James S. Stewart, tells of a woman who was found one day to be reading her Bible. Someone made some kind of comment about her reading her Bible, and she responded that she was not reading her Bible; her Bible was reading her.³ So it is that baptism reads us; it reveals us; it tells us who we are and where we are from. Write that into the baby book. Something happened alongside the baptism: there was a revelation of the baptized.

We hope something will happen after the baptism.

There is a dictionary on my desk at home. It was given to me on my 9th birthday. It has all the words I need, and it had them the day it was given to me. But it is not much good if I do not use it. The thing is complete as it is, but I have to grow into it. That growing into something is what we hope will happen after baptism. The baptism is complete, but we hope it will be completed.

John R. W. Stott was an Anglican Priest from London and a very prolific author, well known particularly in conservative Christian circles. He was in the United States once upon a time, and a Chicago television reporter interviewed him. The reporter commented that he had had a long and stellar career and had published several books. The reporter wanted to know what he hoped to do next. Stott responded, “I hope to become more Christlike.”⁴

³ James S. Stewart, “Exposition and Encounter: Preaching in the Context of Worship,” *Encounter*, Vol. 19, no. 2, Spring 1958, p. 170.

⁴ Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2001), p. 452.

There it is. There is the future hope with regard to baptism. The future hope applies whether the baptism was that on an adult or an infant.⁵ All baptism tilts toward the future. There is always the hope – in adult baptism as well as infant baptism – that the person will grow from baptism into the baptized life. Baptism accomplishes little if it is not assimilated or appropriated into life. It need never be repeated; but it needs always to be appropriated. Its meaning never fades but its meaningfulness can face. If we are to keep it meaningful, we have to keep growing into it. Write that in the baby book. We hope something will happen after the baptism.

Those parents back in Mark 10 had much to write in their children's books that night about what had happened that day. We have much to write about the event we have witnessed now. Something happened before the baptism took place; something happened while the baptism was taking place; and we hope something will happen after the baptism has taken place.

This isn't something for baby books alone. It is for the autobiography of every person. Something happened long before you were born. It applies to you today. You have the opportunity and responsibility to grow into it every day.

⁵ Cullmann, p. 55.