

One of my favorite books from seminary was called “Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry.” Sounds pretty dry, I’ll admit, but I promise, it’s a fun read. The book’s actually a long written-by-committee document that came out of the Ecumenical Movement. I realize I’m not making a persuasive pitch here. (A very quick sidebar: the word “Ecumenical” describes work done by multiple Christian denominations. “Interfaith” means work between religions; we’re not talking about that today.) So, the World Council of Churches, an Ecumenical group of over 300 Christian denominations worldwide, met in Lima back in 1982 to talk through foundational aspects of churchy stuff. We all agree that Jesus talked about baptism and the Last Supper, and Acts has a lot to say about ordination. Then what? What do those things actually mean in practice? And what do they mean in our various theologies? Normally, I wouldn’t enjoy a 30-something page document written by committee, but this committee did something kinda cool. They didn’t try to write the perfect theological encapsulation of what every one of us has in common. Instead, they made room for disagreement. Actually, the way the document was published, they literally made room. Every page has two columns. The left-hand side is the majority’s theological statement about whatever they’re on about, and the right-hand side is all the caveats and disagreements. You can literally see which statements are more controversial by how full the right side is.

Let me give you an example. The primary left-hand document says baptism requires the use of water. But from the other side of the page, a caveat pipes up. “Well, in places where water’s extremely scarce, baptism is performed just with the laying on of hands” and sometimes, in place of water, sand is used. Sand! Did y’all know that was a thing? Seminarians eat this stuff up. I can’t imagine why the rest of the world doesn’t. Okay, I will admit that might not be everybody’s idea of a good time, but even if it’s not your bag, it’s worth the read when you need help fighting insomnia. Some of it’s really basic, that’s kinda the point, but some’s way more in-depth. Like, we all know what baptism is, right? So we think. We have our liturgy, you can study that. We’ve got the Baptismal Covenant with the great “respect the dignity of every human being” line Episcopalians love so much. We’ve got the catechism, Cranmer, even Wikipedia, but for the most broad and succinct discussion, you gotta go back to that so-called Lima Document.

Now, the 300+ member World Council of Churches agreed that Baptism is a lot of things, and one of those things on the left-hand, mostly agreed upon side of the page reads like so: Baptism is “a liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division whether of sex or race or social status are transcended.” You will not be surprised to know that there is a right-hand-of-the-page caveat. It says, “The readiness of some churches to allow differences of sex, race, or social status to divide the body of Christ has further called into question genuine baptismal unity of the Christian community and has seriously compromised its witness.” In other words, 43 years ago the vast majority of global churches agreed that allowing something as simple as one’s identity to split Christianity was a major problem. Glad we solved that one. The document’s packed with stuff like that. And it helps to see where so much of Christianity has gone astray. A lot of what they disagreed on in the ‘80s seems quaint compared to modern Christian disagreements. If we were to rewrite that document today, I suspect it’d go something like this. On the left-hand side of the page, “God said ‘Love your neighbor,’” and the right-hand side of caveats would read “Unless your neighbor is poor, or homeless, or gay, or…” and the caveats would fill the page. To put it differently, the divisions in Christianity today are deep, and not only do they point to all sorts of disagreements, they’re shaking the foundations of what Christianity actually means.

Now, one statement that document agreed on without any caveats is that baptism is a kind of cleansing, a purgation even. No surprise, but over the past week or so, the idea of sacred purgation has been real live. Follow me on this one. Baptism involves that dove-like Holy Spirit. In other parts of scripture, the Holy Spirit’s

described in calm and ferocious ways. In some places, it's the breath of God that gives us life, in others it's the whirlwind blowing chaos, and in others still it's a fierce firestorm beneath a crucible of souls. Now, I know that image is a bit scary and probably sounds awful painful, but it's not described in scripture as a bad thing. It's good to have your chaff burned off. Think of it like running a lighter around the edges of a freshly knitted sweater. The flame is not there to consume, it's just there to trim off the fuzzy bits. Crucibles -- not the Arthur Miller kind, mind you -- crucibles are used to separate substances from their impurities. It's not a process of destruction, it's a process of healing and making right, making whole. I realize it's a mighty fine line between encouraging purging impurities on one side and forcing purgation on someone else, but that's a perversion of the intent. It's not about creating a pure society, it's about sloughing off what's spiritually counter-productive. Think of it kinda like a New Year's Resolution for your soul. Life-altering change often requires some kind of loss. Out with the old and self-defeating, in with the new and life-giving.

Great, that's great. But all this talk of fire and water and wind and purgation can make weeks like this last one theologically tempting. As we sit here this morning, horrendous fires continue to rip through California, and the images we've seen look like nothing short of hell on earth. It's tempting to see disasters like that one and lay some of our theologies over top of 'em, as though the mighty wind of the Spirit has become a bellows for the crucible's flames, and the only thing that can stop it are the baptismal waters of liberation. It's mighty tempting to look at the incomprehensible and attribute it to God. But that's a temptation we need to purge. God's not punishing LA as a city of sin, just like God didn't punish New Orleans with Katrina, despite what some televangelists said. Chaos is a thing that exists in our world, like gravity or lake-effect snow. It's just a part of Creation. It simply is. And humanity has to deal with it.

If you really wanna find God in the flames of Southern California, set aside those baptismal images and take up the advice of good ol' Mr. Rogers. Did you know he was a Presbyterian minister? On top of all the good he did in his Neighborhood, he was a preacher man, too. And when disasters struck and people suffered, he used to say "Look for the helpers." You can see God in the helpers. Not the flames, not that tree-tearing wind, but in the hands, the feet, the hearts of the people. If there's anything baptismal about what's happening out west, it's not in the flames, it's in the hands of John the Baptist helping Jesus back to his feet. Now, of course, just like everything else, you will find Christians that point to those fires and say God's the column of flame. But y'all, that's not us. We don't assign God's judgement. If anything, we assign love, and in that love, in that helping, maybe the world gets to see a bit more of God.