

Frogs in the Font

I grew up in a small town in the South, and we only had two churches there (the two small “holy roller” churches didn’t count), the Methodist and the Baptist. As far as I could tell, there wasn’t a great deal of difference in them – the two buildings were similar in style, size and construction, and the liturgy didn’t seem to be all that different. Part of that, I’m sure, could be attributed to the fact that both congregations expected a lot of fire and brimstone in the preachers’ sermons, and both congregations vied for the same population for new converts. Part of the reason, too, I think lay in the fact that the two pastors covered for each other. That is, if one had a heavy load of visitations to the sick, elderly, and shut-ins, or if one had to be away from his church for whatever reason, the other pastor shouldered his colleague’s duties. Should one of the pastors be away, why his congregation simply attended the other church’s services until he returned. All in all, it was a congenial atmosphere, and it worked well.

About the only difference I noticed between the two churches was that while we in the Methodist church were “sprinkled” whereas the Baptists were baptized. That is, they were totally immersed, and a baptism was an occasion of careful planning as the only site suitable for baptism was at a creek large enough for a person to be totally immersed. As the only creeks meeting this requirement were some distance away, and as baptism in the colder seasons had a bad effect on the older people, most baptisms were simply delayed until the weather was warm enough. The down side to this was that most people came forward to the altar during the colder seasons, so that by the time the weather became favorable, there was usually a long list of people awaiting baptism. Of course, none of this affected us Methodists, and we were always amused at the Baptists’ plight every summer as they coped with this annual situation.

It’s not that the Methodists didn’t have a similar problem. There were always a few – mostly older persons – who wanted to be baptized through total immersion, but the number was always small, so our pastor never had the logistical problem that faced the Baptists every year.

Finally, the Baptists got a new preacher, who decided almost as soon as he unpacked that his new church needed a baptismal font. Pretty soon, one was in place, and it was the talk of the area for that first year of his ministry. In the first place, very few of the people had even heard of such an innovation. Of course, many of the older Methodists took issue over the expense for such a thing, and all of us boys – Methodist and Baptist alike – were simply intrigued about the mechanics of the font.

Gradually, the novelty of the baptismal font wore off, particularly since our pastor “borrowed” the use of it for the occasional convert who wanted to be baptized by total immersion. The consensus was that even though the font was in the Baptist church, it was a community asset, as everyone treated it as such, including the Baptist minister, for he allowed any denomination – even those holy rollers – to use it.

One year, one of the pillars of the Baptist church decided she had to be re-baptized. Mrs. Morton was an imposing lady – “stout” was the term used by the men, and she ran the women’s activities, both in the Baptist church and in the community. She could have given Queen Victoria and Attila the Hun both lessons on ruling firmly. For all of that, I’m sure she was a good woman, it was just that there were few things that hadn’t been the focus of her attention at one time or another. She was also the grandmother of one of my pals, and we both had learned to stay as far out of her notice as we could.

Jimmy, my buddy, thought the whole thing was a bunch of foolishness – he held that his grandmother had run out of things to interfere with and that being re-baptized was the best she could come up with. Many of the Methodist women thought so too, for I’d heard my mother, who was at that time the

president of the Methodist Missionary Society, discussing the upcoming baptism with my father one evening before I went to bed. Still, and all, it was an event, and as there wasn't much else going on, everyone made as much of it as they wanted. Jimmy, barely eleven, and I both thought it was pretty disgusting, as we both regarded baptism in much the same as we regarded a bath.

This all came up in the late spring. One of the things that Jimmy and I, along with several more of our buddies, did from time to time was to go frog gigging. Actually, it was more an excuse to roam around at night on the weekends, as we seldom wanted to bother with the frogs. Of course, we slipped out after bedtime, as part of the attraction was being out without permission. Jimmy and I had been talking about going gigging the next Saturday night, but we hadn't actually decided to do so yet. I happened to see him early Saturday morning, for mother had sent me to the store to get some sugar. Jimmy was just leaving as I pedaled my bike up to Gibbs' store.

Jimmy was despondent – apparently, he'd run afoul of his grandmother and it had cost him some privileges. I tried to cheer him up, but he wasn't having any, although he began to become angry over the injustice done him. He clearly wanted to get even, and it was then that he had his great inspiration. We would catch some water moccasins and put in the baptismal font, and they would bite his grandmother, and that would be his revenge. Now, a southern water moccasin is a mean and poisonous snake, and reason finally prevailed. However, the idea of putting something into the font was attractive. It didn't take us long to see that the answer was to catch as many of the largest bull frogs we could find and put them in the font.

This was sheer brilliance! That night, we went frog hunting, and we must have caught sixty big old green bull frogs. We put them all into a couple of bags we had brought along, and we then slipped over to the Baptist church. Back then, the church buildings were very seldom locked, for they held little that was worth stealing. Besides everyone knew you'd go immediately to Hell if you stole from the church. So we simply went in throughout the front door of the church and emptied our two bags of frogs into the font. We then crept out and went home.

Church was well attended the next day, given that Mrs. Morton was being re-baptized. Many of the Methodists were there, whether out of respect, curiosity, or fear of retribution for not being there. As I attended the Baptist church about as much as I did my own church I was there, too, for Jimmy had been invited to have Sunday dinner with us, and he had to go to church first. Besides, I too wanted to see what happened with all those frogs that we had put in the font the night before.

The way the procedure went, the Baptist preacher would stand outside the font, while the person to be baptized would walk up a set of steps to the edge of the font and walk down into the font using a set of steps built into the font. Up until the time of the baptism, there were dark drapes pulled across the font. The time came. Mrs. Morton walked up to where the pastor was standing by the font. As she started walking up the steps to the font, the pastor began pulling the drapes open, so that as Mrs. Morton took the first step down into the font, the drapes were fully open. Jimmy's grandmother continued on down into the font. Just as she was taking the last step, we heard a couple of splashes, a loud gasp and then a blood-curdling scream from Mrs. Morton. She had finally seen what was in the font with her, and those frogs must have looked like monsters to her.

The poor woman fainted, and it's a wonder that she didn't drown, for it seemed like forever before some of the men of the church were able to get her up and out of the font. Needless to say, that put an end to the day's activities. Jimmy and I slipped away as quietly as we could and went home, arriving there before my folks had gotten home from the Methodist church. Of course, we were asked about the baptism ceremony, so we had to tell about there being frogs in the baptismal font. Mother thought that

the whole affair was terrible, but my father was more light-hearted about it. Of course, both of them regretted not being there to see it for themselves.

They never did figure out who would have put those frogs in the baptismal font. Privately, the Baptist minister told Reverend Alf, our Methodist minister, that he didn't want to pursue the matter too closely, for he was afraid he might have to read out of the church most of his congregation. He was well attuned to his congregation and knew that there were many who might have been tempted into such an act. He also said he had never seen so many frogs in one place in all his life. The Baptist men had a fine frog leg dinner the following Wednesday before prayer meeting, and they invited the Methodists to share with them. However, my father kept a much closer eye on me after that.

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