

Ware, Timothy. "The Sacrament of Baptism and the Ascetic Life in the Teaching of Mark the Monk." *Studia Patristica* 10 (1970), 441—452.

Ware begins his article by lamenting that while sacraments are officially acknowledged as important, they are scarcely treated in modern works on spirituality, or if they are, the sacrament of the Eucharist gets the spotlight while baptism gets only a "passing mention" (441). In contrast, St. Mark the Monk's theology was dominated by the sacrament of baptism. Forever influencing Orthodoxy, this early ascetic writer became standard reading for the eastern monastic tradition (441, 451). Ware takes a close look at Mark's doctrine of baptism and compares it to teachings of the Messalians, St. Macarius of Egypt, Gregory of Nyssa, and St. Augustine of Hippo. He highlights two important aspects to St. Mark's doctrine of baptism: 1) the completeness of baptism, 2) the stages of baptismal grace. His comparison with the teachings of others demonstrates that the Fathers agree with St. Mark that baptismal grace was *in some sense* complete, but they did not follow Mark's notion of completeness in which he taught that baptismal grace caused the termination of all sin in the baptized. This was thought to be removed only through growth in the virtues or "ascetic struggles."

## **St. Mark's Doctrine of Baptism**

### **The Completeness of Baptism**

First, for St. Mark, baptism is τέλειος (*complete or perfect*). Not even one's growth in holiness—what St. Mark calls ἀγῶνες (*ascetic struggles*)—can add anything to the completeness of grace we receive at baptism (442). Such growth would only be a deeper and deeper revelation or manifestation of the grace we received at baptism.

In delineating the completeness of baptismal grace, St. Mark taught that baptism confers purification, liberty, and the divine indwelling. Through purification, baptism cleanses man completely from all sin—original, actual, and personal. There is no "residue" from the sin of Adam for the baptized (443). The liberty that baptism confers is freedom from the inherited inclination towards evil that causes persons to be dominated by their disgraceful passions. This baptismal liberation restores the "fullness and primal integrity of ... free will" (443). The baptized can still, however, be "assaulted" by the devil, but this assault is not itself sinful but "simply an inevitable consequence of the fact that man is endowed with free will" (444). Whereas St. Augustine taught that baptism cleansed from the guilt of sin but not all of its evil effects, St. Mark teaches a comprehensive cleansing from both.

The divine indwelling (ἐνοίκησις) is perhaps the key to understanding why Mark desires to teach that baptismal grace is τέλειος. In baptism, the person baptized gets God. More specifically, Christ and the Holy Spirit descend into the innermost reality of the heart of the baptized (444). If baptismal grace includes God himself—how can anyone add to that?

### **The Stages of Baptismal Grace**

If one receives the completeness of grace at baptism, how would St. Mark account for the various levels of growth in the faith of those who are baptized? Answering this question brings us to St. Mark's distinction between grace present *μυστικῶς* (*mystically* or *secretly*) and grace experienced *ἐναργῶς* (*clearly* or *actively*). The former is a "seed of perfection" planted within us at our baptism, the latter is the growth of this seed. It is up to the recipient of baptismal grace to cause this seed to grow (445). If the baptized person fails to become more and more aware of her baptismal grace and make the seed of perfection grow, the Spirit will still remain present, but she will not "*feel* His presence nor become *consciously aware* of His activity" (445). If the baptized person does not obey the commandments, she also pollutes her baptismal cleansing (446). As Mark puts it: "Holy baptism is perfect (τέλειον), but it does not make perfect him who does not perform the commandments ... Faith consists not only in being baptized into Christ but also in performing His commandments" (446).

According to Ware, Mark emphatically denies that anyone could ever merit baptismal grace—baptismal regeneration is a free gift. Repayment is impossible. God does, however, expect us to be fellow-workers (σύνεργοι) with Him, and through such work the baptized "gradually discover the true implications of baptism" (446). The fullness of grace is received in baptism, but the full revelation (ἀποκάλυψις) of that grace awaits the experience of the baptized. One grows in his experience and revelation of grace inasmuch as he keeps the commandments. Also, Mark considers obedience to be a part of faith. He could say things like, "believe sincerely in Him *by means of* all the commandments" or "faith consists not only in being baptized into Christ but also in performing His commandments" (446, italics added). One also gains assurance (πληροφορεῖται) that he has received baptismal grace "according to his fulfillment of the commandments" (446).

The peak of the Christian life, then, is not so much when one receives the fullness of grace in baptism. Rather, it is when the baptized come to a conscious experience or immediate awareness or fuller revelation of that grace. "The reality of grace is not simply coterminous with the conscious experience of grace" (447). According to Mark the Monk, no matter how much a Christian fails to experience grace or obey the commandments one's baptismal consecration could never be completely lost (450).

### Comparing St. Mark to Others

There is a strong anti-Messalian polemic at work in Mark's work *De baptismo*. The Messalians apparently held that sin is still active after baptism; baptism "profits nothing," and only ascetic struggles can gradually uproot sin (442). St. Mark's doctrine is therefore in most obvious contrast to the Messalian position. It is also in contrast to the position of St. Augustine, who held that although baptism removes the guilt of sin, it did not free one from all the effects of sin (444). Anything less than a comprehensive cleansing of sin would have been, for St. Mark, an infringement upon the completeness of baptism.

The point of agreement between St. Mark and the Messalian position is this: the intention of grace (or the "climax of the Christian life") is for the Christian to reach a conscious experience of grace through obedience to the commandments (447). St. Mark even uses certain phrases associated with the Messalians (i.e. ἐν πάσῃ πληροφορίᾳ καὶ

αἰσθήσει), which Ware argues indicate that he was not wholly unsympathetic to the Messalians' perspective. Yet the Messalians equated the experience of grace with grace itself, whereas St. Mark argued that the fullness of grace exists in the baptized whether they ever come to a full experience of it or not. This places St. Mark "midway between the 'mystical materialism' of the Messalians and the 'intellectualism' of Evagrius" (447).

Macarius of Egypt in the Macarian Homilies can also be contrasted with St. Mark's position, although Ware highlights some similarities as well. The Macarian Homilies have "Messalian affinities" according to Ware, and teach that the Adamic "veil of the passions" (κάλυμμα τῶν παθῶν) is still operative after baptism (449). Baptism certainly does not have the central role in the Macarian Homilies that it plays in St. Mark's theology. Macarius' emphasis often lied not in sacramental baptism, but spiritual baptism (449). However, Macarius insists in the *Great Letter* that the Holy Spirit is given at the moment of sacramental baptism, and he also writes in the *New Homilies* of Type III about the completeness of the baptismal "talent" (450). Ware concludes from this that the contrast between Macarius and St. Mark is less striking than one would expect (450). Another difference, however, is that whereas Macarius would warn that those who fail to work with the talent given at baptism will be "deprived" of this talent, Ware suspects that St. Mark would have been careful never to write any such thing (450).

Ware also brings to bear some unpublished homilies he has consulted in a manuscript at the Vatican. In these homilies Ware claims Macarius even argues that the baptized are not initially conscious or aware of the presence of the Spirit following their baptism, but over time they gradually become more aware. He refers to this as an "increase" in the Spirit and believes this increase is contingent on one's progress in the virtues (450). This is strikingly similar to St. Mark's teachings. Thus we might say that Macarius agrees with Mark that the Spirit constitutes the source of our spiritual life and that we receive this Spirit at the sacrament of baptism—even if we may only become conscious of his presence through a gradual ascetic process of advancing in the virtues. Ware tames his parallels with a sobering critical perspective: it is far from certain which of the Macarian Homilies were actually written by Macarius, and even if he initially wrote them, it is possible they have subsequently undergone revision to conform them to an orthodox sense.

There is also both agreement and disagreement on the doctrine of baptism between St. Mark's and Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory, like Mark, believes "the spiritual life as a whole is nothing else than the realization of the initial grace of baptism" (448). Unlike Mark, however, Gregory "qualifies" the completeness of baptism by teaching that baptism does not bring a sudden halt to all evil in the person baptized, but "a kind of break in the continuity of evil" (448). Gregory considered it theological error to imagine that "evil vanishes altogether from our nature" after baptism, for such evil is only overcome through ascetic struggle (448). Ware offers a surprising quotation from Gregory in which he boldly states that if after baptism the baptized person's life does not change into conformity with God's commandments, such a person is not truly regenerate:

... If, when the washing of baptism is applied to the body, the soul does not cleanse itself from the stains of the passions, but our life after initiation continues to be the same as it was before—then, thought it may be a bold thing to say, yet I will say it without shrinking: in

such cases the water remains water, since the gift of the Holy Spirit is nowhere manifested in what has taken place. (448)

Here Gregory's insight is clearly irreconcilable with St. Mark's position (though Ware calls it a "difference of emphasis") and "approximates more closely to the Augustinian position" (449). Here he is also joined in this approximation by Diadochus of Photice, who taught that baptism frees from "the defilement of sin" (which Augustine called *reatus*) but does not remove the Adamic "duality of the will" inherited by all and only removed through ascetic effort (449). Also, as we have seen, the Macarian Homilies also taught something similar about the "veil of passions" that persists after baptism.

### **Conclusion**

Although the whole of St. Mark's doctrine of baptismal grace is not widely accepted, his influence on subsequent theological development is unmistakable. Ware closes by mentioning his influence upon the Hesychast movement, St. Gregory of Sinai (1255-1346), Kallistos and Ignatios Xanthopoulos (14<sup>th</sup> century). "The authors take as their starting point and foundation precisely the sacrament of baptism" and consider the goal of the Christian life to return to the perfect grace of received in baptism (451). Ware considers it a pity that St. Mark's "incoherent yet perceptive work" has not also had a great impact on western writers. The reason why St. Mark would not appeal to many Protestants might be explained in part by the fact that many protestant theologies of grace do not consider sacramental baptism to be cause or timing of regeneration and the divine indwelling, but rather, the moment of faith.

But this does not do away entirely with the sort of questions Mark's theology raises. Would Protestants consider the grace received at the movement of faith to be in some sense complete? If Augustine (along with Gregory of Nyssa and Diadochus of Photice) was right in teaching that the divine indwelling does not erase all sin, what influence does it have over sin? To what extent does it change the sinner? Furthermore, do Catholic or Protestant theologies ever equate the experience of grace with the presence of grace? How far does the presence of God within overlap with our conscious experience of him? If the Holy Spirit can "increase," could he also "decrease"? Although the Christian receives the divine indwelling at the moment of regeneration, does the presence of the Spirit within the Christian increase to the degree that she fulfills the commandments or abides in Christ? Likewise, does it decrease according to the same principle when she fails to abide in the commandments? Or, rather, are we to understand the Spirit as always being fully present, but our conscious experience of him as that which fluctuates? If the latter, what are we to think of those who profess faith and are baptized but who never subsequently manifest the presence of the Spirit? Is it safe to say that these questions are worthy of more discussion from western theologians?