

This is baptism?

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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There is much about how religion and Christianity are understood and publicly discussed in our post-Christian Canadian context that produces a mixture of bemusement and genuine puzzlement for me. This week's entry in the "head scratcher" category comes via an [article from Wednesday's *Globe and Mail*](#) by Kate Soles that tells the story of her process of decision-making on the issue of whether or not to get her baby baptized.

Soles' is a classic postmodern parenting tale of the agonized apprehension and misgivings that come along with questions of how/if she might participate in the rituals of the church given her own agnosticism:

In my own state of uncertainty, how could I promise to share my faith with Eliot? How would I foster his spirituality and help him celebrate God's presence when I needed convincing of it myself? I worried that I lacked the conviction to make such vows, that doing so would appear artificial and dishonest.

The breakthrough, for Soles, comes in the form of arriving at an understanding of baptism as a step in the path of self-discovery, authenticity, and independence:

I hope that unabashedly showing Eliot our individual theologies allows him to carve his own spiritual path. Ultimately, I want to give my son the tools to make independent decisions, to afford him the desire and the courage to choose compromise over violence, compassion over intolerance.

Of course, there are *many* questions that could be asked about the understanding of baptism on display in this article. But I am less interested in the infant vs. believers baptism question here, than I am in the way in which baptism is here pressed almost entirely into the service of the **self**. Baptism is—surprise!—mostly about **me**.

We find nothing here of the bracing biblical language of dying to sin and self, and rising to new life in Christ, nothing of the transfer of allegiance from the kingdom of this world to the kingdom of God, nothing of repentance and forgiveness, nothing of cleansing and new life, nothing of the (sometimes) uncomfortable accountability of community, nothing that might suggest that baptism is about putting a stake in the ground and declaring that you are aligning yourself with Christ, his church, and his kingdom, as God's means of fixing a broken world.

Rather, baptism is seen as a symbolically meaningful personal event in the spiritual journey of parents and, indirectly, children which can be more or less supplied with the content of our choosing. It is about serenity and acceptance and unity and wonder. Baptism is less about Jesus and a life given to him in response to his life given for us than it is about *me* and the way in which Jesus might prove more or less useful in my ongoing journey toward authenticity and spiritual self-discovery.

Of course, I am not against things like serenity and acceptance, nor do I think that these experiences are inappropriate components of the experience of baptism. I am absolutely convinced the acceptance and welcome of a nurturing church family is a crucial part of what we are being baptized into as followers of Jesus.

And I certainly think that the Spirit of God can and does move in and through many of our attempts at connecting and participating with the reality of the divine, regardless of their motives.

But I really do think that when it comes to this central, historical ritual of the Christian faith, it is important that we get the order straight. In baptism, we are placing

ourselves at the service of Jesus. In stories like this one, I fear, the exact opposite is the case.

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