

Baptismal terrors

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [September 13, 2000](#) issue

"Admiral, the great navy of the State of Nebraska," my 1991 citation from Governor Ben Nelson of Nebraska declares. It continues, "I do strictly charge and require all officers, seamen, tadpoles and goldfish under your command to be obedient to your orders as Admiral. . . ."

In August I read an ad in a Nebraska newspaper for "Baptismal Tub: great for reptiles, alligators, etc.," followed by a phone number. A skeptical Nebraskan would smell a hoax here, but my officers and seamen checked it out as authentic. It is true that when Christians deconsecrate something it can be used for almost anything: old churches become bars, individual glass communion cups make fine mini-shot glasses, and altar linens can serve as wine-stained tablecloths.

So a deconsecrated baptismal tub could be motorized to create fake currents and used for lap-swimming in the home—or storage for anything that needs wetness. But what Baptist decided to evoke horrors and bring to mind "reptiles and crocodiles"?

The Bible does speak of our enemy the reptiles, "cold-blooded, air-breathing, vertebrate animals," often called "creeping things." If there is no biblical alligator, Leviticus 11:30 does list its kin, the crocodile, as unclean. And, of course, there is Leviathan, but only a deconsecrated tank from a First Baptist or Memorial Baptist Church would be big enough for him.

Were the Baptists who are unloading this tub making a theological statement? While I do not know (but respect what I know of) the nuances of baptism-by-immersion among the "born again," I don't think Baptists make much of the terrors of the water. We catholic Christians who baptize infants do—ordinarily without enough water on hand to make the point.

We "have been buried with Christ by baptism into death" (Rom. 6:4), and in that death have with him visited all the reptiles and alligators and terrors. For us, they are already in the water, from which one rises and gets to "walk in newness of life." So for us if such a tank were put to reptile-and-alligator use it could be described as

“pre-owned and pre-tested.”

When Baptist-conditioned Bill Moyers and I first met in 1976 while he was filming *Born Again*, he asked whether I was born again. Yes. When? “February 26, 1928.” What? You don’t look old enough for that date.” “Well, I was exactly three weeks old.” Was I born again since then? “Yes, today,” and every start of a day.

At a press conference Harold Lindsell, the heresy-hunting and whip-cracking late editor of *Christianity Today*, readied himself to diss me as a hopeless *Christian Century* liberal. His climactic statement was, “And I suppose you believe in baptismal regeneration.” Those aren’t fighting words where we come from, but were in his world. Being a Lutheran catholic I answered orthodoxly, as always, that Luther’s *Catechism* says that “with the word of God . . . Baptism . . . is a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Ghost, as St. Paul says, Titus, chapter third.” Yes, I believed.

Hit me in the knee at 3:00 a.m. and I can reflexively recite that catechism, having memorized it in fear of the reptile-and-alligator glares I’d get from my pastor-teacher if I was unprepared. And out of love for the text and its meanings. Lindsell heard me quote that passage about regeneration, gave *me* his reptile-and-alligator glare and said, “It figures.” It figures.

It figures.