

The Baptism of David Swimmer

by Dwight McCormick

He'd read somewhere that laughter was the beginning of prayer. The day he was baptized then made a lot of people start to pray.

He was 14 years old and 250lbs. His pastor and his mama sat down with him for a talk about "The Lord" about a month prior on a Saturday in August where he solemnly agreed that Jesus was his Lord and Savior. Baptism was the next step.

First Baptist Church of Bluefield had a baptistry so they wouldn't be requiring the services of Camp Creek for this particular ceremony.

The church pews were straining at the crowds who had come to see David get saved. There was no salvation in the water really, but the Baptists preached the gospel of immersion. There was a certain Baptist church in Kentucky that pressured a man who'd been sprinkled to get re-baptized in the creek because they didn't believe his Presbyterian baptism took. Something in the Bible says we're saved by Grace through faith lest any man should boast...but don't tell that to the Baptists.

The sermon that morning was like all sermons on Sundays when the preacher knows there are more people going to be there for the services.

He thundered "G-g-g-g-et right with God b'cause the d-d-d-day is c-comin' soon when he will reckon all p-p-p-people unto himself. If the judgment comes and you haven't given your heart to J-j-j-j-jesus then you will join those on the left hand of God the Father Almighty to everlasting darkness where there will be w-w-w-weeping and

gnashing of teeth." Reverend Atwell had been called to preach but the Lord hadn't seen fit to provide him with healing for his stammer. Pride stood in the way of the grace of going to a speech therapist. A grown man studying diphthongs just seemed foolish and maybe even showed a lack of faith.

In addition to the challenge of sitting through the delivery of the sermon, the message being preached didn't seem like very good news. This version of the gospel conveyed the message: "God hates you. You had better appease him before you burn for all time." How could a God of love want to punish you for eternity? Was God bipolar? Did God really need all that praise? Was God insecure and needy? If so was God made in our image?

Finally the preacher finished his rant and the time came for the baptism. Things were ready by the time the plinking piano had lead the gathering in three verses of Blessed Assurance. They had to change into robes and make their way into the pool while the congregation belted out the hymn with vigorous piety.

During the hymn the person to be baptized would put on a white robe, and was asked to bring a handkerchief (preferably white for this formal day) and a change of underwear. The wet pair wouldn't do after the fact. The preacher and David did their part and arrived in the pool on cue during the last verse.

"...this is my story, this is my song, praising my savior all the day long." So he could take back his authority the pastor always thanked Jackie for her playing after the hymn placing attention where it should be, on him.

The curtains in front of the baptismal pool were normally closed. But since it was being used today the curtains were peeled back to reveal a lovingly painted scene from the New River Gorge on the wall behind the water. Once the deacons suggested a paper mache

bridge be added like the one in Fayette County that was 876 feet over the New River but some of the ladies circle groups gently helped them decide it wouldn't be in good taste.

The pool was just behind the choir loft and was about 10' by 10' and four feet deep.

David met the pastor who had put on a white robe of his own. The words were said about Jesus having gone down to the Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist and how it had been pleasing in God's sight. Then the pastor instructed the big ol boy to place the handkerchief over his mouth. He'd forgotten the change of underwear but he'd deal with that later.

"Are you r-r-r-ready to be baptized?" the preacher asked.

"Yessir."

Placing his hand over his mouth with the handkerchief, a red bandana, the preacher put his hands on the back of David's head and slowly lowered him back into the water.

"I b-b-baptize you in the n-n-n-name of the F-f-f-father, the S-s-s-son, and the Holy G-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-g-ghost."

David had begun to lose his breath somewhere during the Son part of the statement and tried to keep from flailing. When he was too heavy for the preacher to lift him easily out of the water after the Holy Ghost was incited he couldn't help it any longer and swung his arms wildly just to get to the surface and get some air. David launched his large frame up out of the water turning to the side of the little pool to drape his arms over the side facing the choir loft. He had inadvertently slapped the glasses off the pastor in the process and taken down one of the curtains at the front as he crawled nearly out of the pool in his panic.

"Jesus Christ are you trying to down me!" David yelled at the preacher who was speechless.

The congregation erupted in laughter and gradually so did David. The preacher managed an awkward chuckle or two before introducing the closing hymn and slamming his soaked clothing to the ground in the changing room after the service at the lack of respect these people show in the Lord's house.

The congregation gathering themselves before the final hymn was perhaps the biggest miracle that took place in that church in a long while.

David went home with his mama and daddy to have some chicken and biscuits. He realized that laughing in church wasn't the respected thing to do, but it was the graceful thing to do. David figured that Jesus was laughing with him (and at him), and he believed that laughter was a faith all on its own.

"Lord we thank you for the bounty of thine table and the joy of thine Grace for us. Amen".

