

## *Immersion by Kathleen Bagley*

I am a Methodist; thus, when I accepted Jesus, I was sprinkled. I wasn't dunked in some algae-encrusted baptistery, nor submerged in some nasty, red-muddied, catfish-filled river. No, I was sprinkled. The pastor took his hand and dipped it into a bowl of water...he let the drops fall onto my head, barely wetting my hair. And that was it. I was baptized as well as any Methodist ever had been. I must have been about seven, because my friends and I were more concerned with catching small animals and getting dirty than where we were going when we died. It was many years before I thought of my baptism again.

I was in fifth grade, and my best friend, Lauren, ran up to me on the playground. Excitement made her blue eyes glow and her cropped blonde hair seem to shine.

"Katie! I'm getting baptized on Sunday! You've gotta come! You've GOT to!"

Then she looked at me worriedly, gasping,

"Katie! Have you been baptized?"

"Yeah, why?"

She cast discrete glances over her shoulders, put her hand on my arm and whispered...

*"You're a Methodist."*

"So? I've already been baptized."

"Well my mama says they don't baptize you right in Methodist churches."

I paused. Suddenly, I was concerned.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you could go to Hell!"

Lauren and I looked around for a more private place. The dark green shadows of the pecan tree, with the branches almost touching the ground seemed like the only place appropriate to talk about something as important and quiet and sacred as where my immortal soul would end up when I died, so we sat there beneath it. It provided a sort of curtain, a shroud. It was just me, Lauren, her Barbie lunchbox, and my heart thudding in my chest.

We sat in silence for quite sometime, neither of us quite sure where to

begin. Our conversations had always been about mundane, petty, frivolous things like how many Oreos we could each eat, or why Lauren thought that touching a turtle would give her AIDS, and a certain boy she liked. Never had we talked of anything like this. We had always felt too young, too free. Finally, I broke the silence.

"What do you mean they baptize you wrong?"

Lauren took a deep breath.

"Mama says that in Methodist churches they don't put you under the water. They just sprinkle some water over your head and you're done."

"And what's wrong with that?"

"Well, in the Bible they dunked everybody. Even Jesus was dunked. He wasn't sprinkled."

"Well, why do Methodist churches do it if it isn't right? I mean, I trust my pastor. He knows what he's doing."

"Mama says it's not your fault. She says that a long time ago the guy who invented the Methodist church misread something in the Bible and started sprinkling everybody instead of dunking them. I'm pretty sure that means

they're all going to Hell. It means they haven't been baptized at all."

"So that means my mom and dad are going to Hell?" I demanded. "That means Granna and Grandad and their parents and their parents and their parents are going to Hell, just because of what some guy said two hundred years ago?"

Lauren was quiet. We sat there, the air thick with worry and confusion and pity and so many other, unidentifiable things.

Then the bell rang.

Could I really go to Hell because I was sprinkled and not dunked? The question haunted me, hounded me, for weeks. I tried to drown it, but one thought kept bobbing to the surface of my mind, "What if I *die*? What if I die and she's right? What if I go to Hell?"

I pictured myself dying in a tragic car accident, with my backpack slung over a tree branch and my body torn and bleeding in the road. I imagined looking up to the sky, expecting to hear Jesus say, "Come home, my child," and responding instead with, "I'm sorry...you weren't baptized right...now you must descend into Hell, where you will be tormented for all eternity!"

I imagined the sadness of my funeral, Lauren holding a white rose and

crying because we wouldn't be in the same place when *she* died. I imagined my mother, sitting there, her only comfort thinking that I was in Heaven...and being so very wrong. I imagined Hell, the flames licking my skin, and the screams of the sinners all around me, and the darkness, and that three-headed dog I'd read about in Social Studies howling triple dooms down on me, the eleven-year-old sinner, the unbaptized.

My mother only said, "Honey, how you do it doesn't matter. That's just what Baptists say. Sprinkling is just as good as dunking, now go and play."

But the thought of Hell, the thought that I could be wrong, continued to plague me, waking and dreaming, until one Sunday after church, I asked my pastor if he would mind baptizing me like the Baptists do.

"Why?" he asked. "You've already been baptized once."

"Well...I...uh...I want...to be baptized like Jesus was. You know, underwater."

The lie behind those words made my heart sick. I didn't want to do it to be like Jesus. I wanted to do it so I wouldn't go to Hell. But how could I risk it? And how could I tell anyone that I was afraid?

"Well, Katie, that's a noble reason. I have been so happy, watching you and your faith grow these past few years. Sure, I'd be delighted."

The following Sunday, the whole congregation went down to the cow pond in Mr. Dickerson's pasture to watch me get Baptized like Jesus. Lauren was there and she smiled and waved. Her mother told me how proud she was of me, how proud she was that I'd seen the light and wanted to be like Jesus.

I walked out, the mud squishing underfoot, to meet my pastor in the cow pond.

He smiled.

I smiled.

Then he gently bent me backward, and I felt the water rush over me, tasted a fishy, pond water taste that I tried to ignore, and then it was over.

I readied myself for the rush of warmth, the rush of peace and heavenly approval that I knew would come once I'd really, truly, without-a-doubt been baptized.

I walked out of the water, hugged Lauren and my parents, and *her* parents and listened to the applause of the congregation.

I got in the car (careful to sit on the towel my mother had brought) and stared as the trees flashed past the window. I sat there, staring out the

window for a long, long time and wondered why inside I still felt...empty.