

“Can we have the baby done?” Infant Initiation and Pre-Baptismal Rites

PHILLIP TOVEY

The role of the churches is changing with regard to the baptism of infants. This is a result of alterations both within the churches and within wider society. In the Church of England the debate continues between open baptism and baptismal reform. Meanwhile, our society brings decreasing numbers of children for baptism. In 1990 only twenty-eight per cent of all children born were baptized by the Church of England.¹ Even including the other churches, this leaves a large number of children not baptized. Increasing numbers of unbaptized persons are coming for church weddings, and unbaptized adults are asking for their children to be christened. If a strict line were to be taken on godparents, that they must be both baptized and confirmed, then many couples would have trouble finding three godparents who could fulfil these requirements. It is not surprising that the Church is responding to this situation in a variety of ways. The publication of the papers of the Fourth International Anglican Liturgical Consultation (held at Toronto in 1991) shows various approaches in the Anglican Communion which must widen any domestic discussion.² Implicit in the various baptismal positions are different models of the church as well as disparate baptismal theologies. This article aims to look at some of the contemporary approaches and to tease out some of their differences. The starting point will be to contrast the approach of the Church of England to that of other churches (in which analogous debates are occurring) looking at issues connected with pre-baptismal rites. Many churches are producing services of thanksgiving and blessing. How do they relate to baptism?

Thanksgiving

The policy of some parishes is to offer all, without exception, a thanksgiving service as a prerequisite to baptism, using the provision of the *Alternative Service Book 1980* (ASB). It would seem that the hope is that this would fulfil the desires of those asking for the baptism of their children. Those who are more ‘serious’ would then go on to baptism after adequate preparation. With careful handling it is possible in some places for this strategy to work, in the sense that without alienating the community, thanksgivings have become

1 *Church of England Year Book 1993*, Church House Publishing, London 1993, p 168.

2 D. R. Holeton (ed), *Growing in Newness of Life. Christian Initiation in Anglicanism Today*, The Anglican Book Centre, Toronto 1993.

the norm, and baptisms are now only for the more committed, although in some places where this has happened people are calling the thanksgiving a baptism. What form are these services to take? A comparison between the provision in three different churches shows a wide divergence of theology and practice, leading to important theological and pastoral questions.

The ASB Service of Thanksgiving was introduced to replace the Churching of Women and perhaps to meet the needs of those Anglicans who question the present policy of infant baptism.³ There was some caution over the use of the service for those unable to make baptismal promises, or for it to be seen as an alternative to baptism. Therefore the service was deliberately not called a blessing.⁴ The notes are careful to explain that this service is not baptism and therefore does not make one a member of the church: 'baptism... is the sacrament instituted by Christ for those who wish to become members of his Church' (note 1). The service points to the baptismal challenge in two optional sections: the first is the giving of a copy of one of the gospels to the parents (§5) and the second is the prayer that looks forward to the baptism of the child (§14). It is unfortunate that these are optional for reasons we shall see later.

The United Reformed Church (URC) now includes within it both paedobaptist and anabaptist traditions. Its *Service Book 1989* includes a Baptismal Service (with alternate columns for believer's baptism and infant baptism) and a Thanksgiving for the Birth of a Child.⁵ This service is subtitled 'The Dedication of Parents and the Blessing of Children'. Despite this title, the explanatory notes make clear that the service 'looks forward to baptism at some point in the future, and is not... a substitute for baptism'. This is also made clear in the Introduction which looks to the time that 'this child may come to confess his/her faith in Jesus Christ and be baptized'. Questions of membership are not discussed. Indeed the baptismal service might seem to imply that only those both baptized and confirmed are members of the URC, as only at believers' baptism are candidates welcomed 'to the membership of this congregation'. In its Thanksgiving, the URC goes beyond the provision of the Church of England by pronouncing a blessing over the head of the child. This action is avoided by the Church of England in order to prevent confusion with baptism, the only blessing being a general one, to all present, at the end.

The Baptist Church has two sample services for children in its *Guidebook for Worship Leaders 1991*.⁶ The introduction expects considerable flexibility and sees the aims of the service to be thanksgiving for the birth of the child and the dedication of the parents to a Christian upbringing of the child with the support of the congregation. The First Pattern is for parents 'able to make

3 But see C. H. B. Byworth and J. A. Simpson, *A Service of Thanksgiving and Blessing*, Grove Books, Bramcote 1972, p 7.

4 Liturgical Commission, *The Alternative Service Book 1980: A Commentary*, CIO, London 1980, p 100.

5 United Reformed Church, *Service Book*, OUP, Oxford 1989, pp 37-40.

6 Baptist Union of Great Britain, *Patterns and Prayers for Christian Worship*, OUP, Oxford 1991, pp 109-117.

a full commitment to a Christian upbringing of their child'.⁷ In part it bases its approach on the presentation of Christ in the temple, and includes both naming and blessing. The Second Pattern 'asks for a less explicit Christian commitment'⁸ and its root metaphor is welcome. What is surprising is the complete lack of reference to baptism. There is no looking forward to that event. It is not mentioned in the introduction or the prayers. Infant Presentation seems to have become totally separate from baptism, and is developing its own theology based on the presentation of Christ and Jesus' blessing of children. But are these warrants for infant initiation? Anglicans who wish to substitute thanksgivings for baptisms might well ponder some of the theological implications of these various rites.

All these services have Mark 10:13-16 as their lesson. The Baptists mention the presentation of Christ in the introduction of the First Pattern, and the ASB gives it as an alternative reading (as well as the presentation of Samuel). There are clearly dangers in the use of these passages. On a general level Mark 10 shows that God loves children, but Jesus did not institute a rite of infant blessing by his action. The dominical command is baptism. The children that Jesus blessed were already initiated, i.e. they had been circumcised. Thus it was children of the covenant that were being blessed, and the disciples were rebuked for not recognizing their position. Similarly the presentation of Christ was in fulfilment of Old Testament law (as Luke makes quite clear). It was a part of the ceremonies abolished through Christ's fulfilment of the law; it is not an example of how to dedicate the children of believers, Jesus had already received the covenant sign of circumcision.

It is illuminating to examine how these services handle the relationship between creation and redemption. God as creator is clearly affirmed in Thanksgiving for Birth (ASB §1). The lesson focuses on Jesus' love for children. The URC and Baptist services add the need for careful nurture of the child, as is shown by questions asked of the parents and by the prayers. This all seems to be on the level of creation and natural child care. The omission of anything to do with baptism, either because it is not included (Baptist patterns) or because it is optional (ASB), seems to give the impression that there is nothing more to be said. Thus potentially the challenge of the gospel is omitted from the service. Occasional churchgoers might feel that they have been 'done' by a blessing, but not realize that there is a gospel call to 'repent and be baptized, for the forgiveness of sins'.

The underlying ecclesiological trend appears to be, even for English Anglicans, a shift in a 'gathered church' direction and a move away from Augustinian baptismal theology. The *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) seems to view England as a Christian nation under the monarch 'set over us by thy grace and providence'. All children therefore have a right to be baptized in their parish church. The homily 'of Salvation' states, 'the Son of God, [was] once offered for us upon the cross, to obtain thereby God's grace and remission, as well of our original sin in baptism, as of our actual sin

7 Ibid., p 109.

8 Ibid., p 109.

committed by us after baptism, if we truly repent.⁹ Thus the BCP assures us that 'children which are baptised dying before they commit actual sin, are undoubtedly saved'.¹⁰ It was the Augustinian notion of original sin that led the western church towards universal infant baptism. The grace of baptism is necessary for forgiveness (although not necessarily all who are baptised will go to heaven). This, compounded with high infant mortality, discouraged any postponement of the baptism of children.¹¹ Canon 69 of the 1604 canons even threatens suspension for clergy who delay baptizing a sick child.¹² The Augustinian model of the Church in this christian society is one of wheat and tares, a mixed church that awaits for the parousia to make clear who are the elect. The ASB by contrast says that parents asking for emergency baptism 'should be assured that the questions of ultimate salvation... do not depend on whether or not he had been baptized',¹³ a definite step away from Augustinian theology of the necessity of baptism.¹⁴ Those who press for thanksgiving as a preliminary to baptism seem to be grasping a model of the Church in Missiondom rather than Christendom. There is a desire for the immediate response of active faith to the baptismal interrogation, rather than looking at the request as grace at work and then challenging to sanctification and further conversion of life. The Church is now trying to christianize the nation rather than be the Church in a christian nation. At the same time the nation seems to want to be both pluralist and hang on to a residual concept of a christian society.

Infant catechumenate?

The participants of the Toronto Consultation recommend reform of the present practice of much of the Anglican Communion. They stand 'over against the practice of apparently indiscriminate baptism of all infants soon after birth'.¹⁵ They suggest that a child needs at least one believing parent, and that 'parents who have not participated actively in the eucharistic fellowship should be integrated into the worshipping community prior to the baptism of their children'. Thus they envisage that 'young children whose parents/sponsors are going through a renewal process' might be admitted to the catechumenate.¹⁶ However, they are not admitted 'without an expectation of continuing nurture and formation'. Here is a radical agenda that, if enacted, would cause major changes of practice in English parishes. Central to this proposed reform is the catechumenate.

The catechumenate was resurrected at the second Vatican Council for the

9 *Homilies and Canons*, SPCK, London 1846, p 27.

10 Rubric at the end of 'Publick Baptism of Infants'.

11 J. D. C. Fisher, *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West*, SPCK, London 1965, pp 112f.

12 *Homilies and Canons*, p 38.

13 Emergency Baptism § 106.

14 See C. Buchanan (et al., eds), *Anglican Worship Today*, Collins, London 1980, p 182.

15 D. R. Holeton, *Christian Initiation in the Anglican Communion*, Grove Books, Bramcote 1991, p 7.

16 It is not clear that anyone at Toronto actually practices this approach.

whole Roman Catholic Church partly in response to finding itself in a more secular society, partly to her experience of 'the mission fields'.¹⁷ There has been similar development in Anglicanism, and some Provinces have official rites for the catechumenate.¹⁸ Both Southern Africa and the United States produced their rites as preparation for the baptism of adults, along the lines of the Catholic RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults).¹⁹ They were not envisaged as preliminaries for children of 'not fully integrated' parents, although some commentators had foreseen the catechumenate having an impact on infant baptism.²⁰ There has been some enthusiasm for the adult catechumenate expressed in the Church of England.²¹ It awaits to be seen when the Church of England will produce its own official rites.

Unlike its present modern revival, the ancient catechumenate included children.²² The most illustrious example is that of Augustine. Monica, his mother, had him made a catechumen while a child. 'Even from the womb of my mother... I was sealed with the mark of his cross and salted with his salt.'²³ When, during his childhood, he became sick, Monica wished him baptized, but it was delayed by his father who was not a believer.²⁴ Later, on meeting Ambrose, Augustine renewed his position as a catechumen.²⁵ Yet he was not baptized until after his conversion.²⁶ It is an irony of history that it was his theology, stressing the necessity of baptism, that contributed to the decline of the catechumenate. Catechumens were a recognized part of the church community. They had their place in the liturgy, as can be seen in the Byzantine rite. It contains the Liturgy of the Catechumens, including prayers for the catechumens, and the announcement that the catechumens should depart.²⁷ Some Eastern Catholic churches have revived the catechumenate but have been unwilling to exclude them even though this pronouncement is retained.

One of the questions the catechumenate raises is the status of catechumens. In some way they are in the Church, because they have committed themselves to instruction and training in the faith, and they participate in the worship of the Church; however, they are not yet baptized and therefore have not come to be members. What then is their standing? The longer the catechumenate,

17 R. Burnish, *The Meaning of Baptism*, Alcuin Club/SPCK, London 1985, pp 133-145.

18 A. T. Eastman, *The Baptizing Community*, Seabury Press, Minneapolis 1982.

19 ECUSA: *The Book of Occasional Services*, The Church Hymnal Corporation, New York 1988, pp 112-126. CPSA: *An Anglican Prayer Book*, Collins, London 1989, pp 417-419. Roman Catholic Church, *The Rites*, Pueblo, New York 1976, 1983, pp 13-181.

20 A. Kavanagh, *The Shape of Baptism: The Rite of Christian Initiation*, Pueblo, New York 1974, p 130.

21 P. Ball, *Adult Believing*, Mowbray, London & Oxford 1988. See also *On the Way: Towards an Integrated Approach to Christian Initiation*, CHP, London 1995.

22 T. M. Finn, *Early Christian Baptism and the Catechumenate: Italy, North Africa, and Egypt*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville 1992, p 15.

23 Augustine, *Confessions*, 1 XI 17.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid 5 XIV 24.

26 For his conversion see 8 XII 29; for his baptism 9 VI 14.

27 See H. Wybrew, *The Orthodox Liturgy*, SPCK, London 1989, p 81.

the more pressing this question, not least because of the possibility of catechumens dying before baptism. Hippolytus suggests that the martyr 'will be justified, for he has received baptism in his blood'.²⁸ Aidan Kavanagh seems to hold that catechumens are members of the Church because their intention is to be baptized.²⁹ The *Order of Christian Funerals* gives guidelines and texts for catechumens, and although they are unbaptized sees them as 'a part of the household of Christ'; within but not fully included.³⁰

Catechumens publicly ask for instruction and seek christian faith. If, as in the Church of South India, the adult catechumen is asked 'Do you accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour?' with the answer expected 'I do', then there would seem to be little reason not to baptize immediately.³¹ Other rites of making a catechumen avoid such categorical questions, leaving them until baptism.³² Further rites and stages may mark the passage of the adult to baptism. At the making of an infant catechumen, questions would presumably be asked of the parents and godparents. It is not clear what would be the further stages for a child. The Toronto statement envisages that the parents and godparents would go through instruction and incorporation in the eucharistic fellowship. At that point the children would be baptized. However, it does not want an infant catechumenate to become a back door to the widespread refusal of infant baptism.³³

The catechumenate stresses the challenge of the gospel, both in terms of learning more about Jesus and through growth in faith. The ASB Thanksgiving rite could easily be developed into the admission of a catechumen not least by the adding of consignation. This would strengthen the role of redemption in the service. The ecclesiology implicit in the catechumenate model would seem to be that of a gathered church. It takes seriously the need for measured and informed consideration of the baptismal interrogation by the parents and godparents, but does it 'fence the font' in an unnecessarily strict way?

Two models of initiation

In the contemporary Anglican debate two models of the church seem to be in collision: the mixed church and the gathered church. These have different theological emphases, which might be characterised by 'types' (not exactly Weberian ideal types, but similar ones that are designed to clarify the analysis of a complex situation). These models have an impact on the approach to pre-baptismal rites.

An Augustinian model maintains the necessity of baptism, sees baptism as effective in conveying grace, sees the request for baptism as a sign of grace at work, and stresses the need for conversion of life after baptism. This might

28 G. J. Cuming, *Hippolytus: A Text for Students*, Grove Books, Bramcote 1976, p 17.

29 Op. cit., p 130.

30 *Order of Christian Funerals*, Geoffrey Chapman, London 1991, pp 366-377.

31 Church of South India, *The Book of Common Worship*, OUP, New York and Madras 1963, p 102.

32 See ECUSA, *The Book of Occasional Services*, pp 115-117.

33 D. Holeyton, 1991, op. cit., p 12.

lead to a strong post-baptismal follow-up programme in the church such as is contained in *Good News Down the Street*.³⁴ Behind this is a vision of a mixed church, and a knowledge that not all those who are sacramentally initiated are in the kingdom of God.

The reformist model stresses the integrity of the sacraments, and therefore the need for clear faith before incorporation in the visible body of Christ. Parents would be required to be fully initiated before their children would be baptized. The unbaptized would need preparation, perhaps in the catechumenate, before being admitted. Behind this is a gathered church model, which is concerned with ensuring that those who come for the sacraments of the church live up to what they profess and provide evidence in their lives as a preliminary to baptism. There is a desire to ensure that the font is not used as a sub-christian rite of passage.

Looking at the sociology of the situation, we might say that the catechumenate arose because a small persecuted group, which was growing in appeal to the world around, wanted to keep its purity and vigour (intensified by a belief in the difficulty of obtaining forgiveness for post-baptismal sin). Thus it started the catechumenate, with all its rigour, requiring a lengthy preparation for baptism. St Augustine developed his 'two cities' theology as both society and the place of the church in society were changing. The mixed church model aided the Church in its understanding of itself within Christendom.

Since the enlightenment, the Church has been on retreat, culminating in the 'secularization' process of this century, as evidenced by fewer and fewer coming for baptism and confirmation. Although some still argue that Britain is a christian country and that they do not want the Church to become a 'sect' (a particularly ambiguous word), many people in society see the Church as irrelevant. They no longer believe in the necessity of baptism. Britain is now pluralist, and this is often practically interpreted as meaning that children should make up their own minds later. Sixty-two per cent of people do not have their children baptised in the Church of England. Even if we take into consideration the other churches, that leaves a lot of children making up their own mind. Thus all churches are left with a large mission field in this country, and an increasing experience of adult initiation.

The growing numbers of adults seeking baptism is likely to have an impact on the training of candidates of all ages. Most churches have a traditional expectation that young people confirmed will go through some training in confirmation classes, often lasting several weeks or even months. The growing number of adults seeking baptism has led to similar classes for them. This raises a question about the discrepancy between infant and adult preparation. If adults require long preparation, why should preparation for parents asking for the baptism of their children be minimal? This discrepancy is likely to lead to greater concern with infant baptism, more effort put into preparation, and a rejection of anything that looks indiscriminate; then

34 M. Wooderson, *Good News Down the Street*, Grove Books, Bramcote 1989.

questions about the provision of pre-baptismal services arise.

Pre-baptismal rites

Is there a place for a 'free floating' non-initiatory thanksgiving? In part, the origin of the ASB service was to replace the Churching of Women, which had become an embarrassment with its themes of purification after childbirth. However, there is probably still a place for suitable prayers in response to the birth of a child. The Thanksgiving service also have been produced with those Anglicans in mind who had difficulties with infant baptism, but designed to avoid the impression that it is an alternative to christening. It would be ironic if it ends up being used for those outside the regular fellowship who accept infant baptism! There is also the potential irony that those who reject the use of infant baptism as a 'folk religion' rite of passage, create a thanksgiving, which by affirming creation but omitting redemption, ends up being even more 'folk-religionish' than the original practice. Important questions are posed; one concerns the propriety of producing services for those who are not members of the Church or who seem to have lapsed; another is how the Church deals with those who have been moved by a sense of awe at the birth of a child and who insist that they want to respond through baptism, but do not see this as including any ecclesiological commitment. Should we provide creation affirming services, or put more effort into evangelization and catechesis?

What then of the role of pre-baptismal services for infants? In a church that advocates infant baptism, there can be nothing that suggests a 'blessing' is equivalent to baptism. It is unfortunate that 'a blessing' is easily comprehensible to the common mind, whereas 'thanksgiving' does not have the same ring, and 'catechumenate' is completely incomprehensible. The danger of thanksgivings is that they have little gospel challenge in them. Perhaps the paragraphs in the ASB which are at present optional, the giving of the Gospel (§5) and the prayer asking for the child to be led to baptism (§14), should be made compulsory and an introduction added which also points to baptism. Thus the service might look more like the URC rite. Alternatively the service could be called a Blessing, if it were the first stage of the catechumenate (perhaps that could be a subtitle to the service). Then it becomes the point at which the parents commit the child to seeking faith and learning more, while the parents and godparents also complete their incorporation in the eucharistic fellowship. These are issues which will need further consideration both with the revision of the ASB and with the changing pastoral situation. They are issues that all the churches have to grapple with, as the role of the churches continues to change in our society.

The Revd Phillip Tovey is Team Vicar of St Francis Local Ecumenical Project, Banbury Team Ministry.