



incorporating the Transactions of the
BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY

EDITORIAL

IN the report *Church Relations in England*, which was published in 1950 as the outcome of conversations between representatives of the Archbishop of Canterbury and of the Evangelical Free Churches in England, it was stated that: "The question of Christian initiation is at present being discussed by all the Communion represented among us and divergent views are held within each Communion" (*op. cit.*, p. 32). During the eight years since then the matter of Christian Initiation has been taken up also in wider ecumenical discussions. It is at present being discussed within theological commissions of the World Council of Churches and within the Faith and Order Department of the British Council of Churches; it is very much a live issue at the practical level in the reunion schemes for Ceylon and North India. Commenting on the issue of baptism within these two schemes the Report of the 1958 Lambeth Conference says: "The view that Christian Initiation is only completed when the neophytes first receive Holy Communion is theologically sound. It is fully recognized that it is the duty of the Church to care for and nurture neophytes in all stages of initiation" (*op. cit.*, pp. 2, 33). It would be interesting to test Baptist reaction to such a statement. Yet it contains at least one implication which we should consider. The idea of completing Christian Initiation implies a process and not simply one or two actions. Most Baptists would tend, probably, to equate Christian Initiation with the act of believer's baptism. This is of course not how other denominations

think. For them Christian Initiation is a process spread over years and has within itself a series of events. This is most clearly stated in the Church of England document *Baptism and Confirmation Today* (1955), which comments on an earlier report, *The Theology of Christian Initiation* (1948) in these words: "The main achievement of this Report was to re-emphasize the truth that the Christian initiatory rites are to be regarded as a whole. 'The classical order of Christian initiatory rites is: (1) Preparation and Examination; (2) Baptism; (3) Confirmation; (4) First Communion.' (*op. cit.*, p. 19). Its diagnosis of the trouble was that these processes and rites had been too long thought of separately, even in isolation, and there could be no hope of improvement until the unity of the sequence was restored" (*op. cit.*, p. 27).

There is, of course, no explicit evidence in the New Testament that this process was practised by the Early Church, and for that reason it is open to us, perhaps, to reject the idea as irrelevant. On the other hand, that it was the practice fairly soon after New Testament times is clear. In the light of the widespread acceptance of the process of Christian Initiation the concept is worth while considering in the light of current Baptist practice.

On examining the so-called "classical order" of the initiatory rite it is immediately clear that Baptists could claim to hold more closely to it, both in its ordering and in its timing, than most other denominations. So far as its timing is concerned it is certain that in early days it was spread over months and not years, and this reflects our own practice. Let us look for a moment at our Baptist practice in the light of this initiatory rite. It is normal for us to give careful preparation to the candidate for baptism and to make sure that the teaching is understood. In some churches it is the practice to ask the candidate immediately before the baptism certain simple questions concerning the Christian faith; in other churches opportunity is given for a voluntary confession of faith. There can be no doubt that such was the practice early in the Church's history and there is much evidence to suggest that the Creeds as we have them grew out of baptismal confessions of faith. So, clearly, Baptists follow the first part of the rite, the preparation and examination. Again it is clear that baptism by immersion in the Name of the Trinity followed the confession of faith in the earliest days. This again is our current practice. Thus far, then, Baptists could claim to follow the pattern. At this point, however, two questions arise which Baptists should face.

The first concerns the ceremony of laying-on of hands which, during the Middle Ages, came to be known as Confirmation. It is well known that Anglicans are divided over the interpretation of this ceremony, but they will all agree that it is the point at which communicant membership of the church begins. Only rarely do Baptists practise the laying-on of hands after baptism. The New

Testament evidence for connecting the laying-on of hands with baptism is slight, but in *Acts* viii. 14-17 and xix: 1-6, and also in *Hebrews* vi: 2, some relationship is suggested. In the passages in *Acts* the laying-on of hands is connected with the gift of the Holy Spirit. Thus it is doubtful whether any parallel can be drawn between the various rites of the reception into church membership practised in the Free Churches and the practice of laying-on of hands at Confirmation, though both represent the same stage in the life of a convert. In an article entitled "Baptists and the Laying-on of Hands" (*Baptist Quarterly*, XV, 5, Jan., 1954) Dr. Payne called attention to the problem and showed how there had been tensions concerning the rite of laying-on of hands amongst Baptists from earliest times. In the present state of discussion both on denominational and on wider levels the time may well be ripe for Baptists to re-examine the matter, always bearing in mind that it is in fact the common practice of Baptists in Denmark to follow baptism with the laying-on of hands. At the moment Baptists in England seemingly have no clear ceremony to represent the third element in the process of Christian Initiation.

The second question concerns the final element in the process—the first Holy Communion. We may note that the Baptists in Denmark follow the laying-on of hands with the Holy Communion. This point brings us back to the Lambeth Statement quoted earlier. The first Holy Communion, it is claimed, completes Christian Initiation. It is the sign of full membership of the Church. The inference is that it should not be received before baptism and reception into Church membership. Certainly at this point many Baptists would disagree—and so probably would John Wesley! Some would see the Lord's Supper as an evangelical opportunity, by the sharing of which, seekers after Christ find Him. Whilst not wishing to side-step this issue we would ask whether the Lord's Supper, from the first days of the Church in Jerusalem, was not, in fact, a meal shared in by members of the Church only. No one wishes to erect a legalistic barrier around the Table of our Lord, but it is open to question whether the regular sharing in the Communion by those who are not church members does not take away something of the sacred privilege and responsibility of church membership. It is at least arguable that partaking in the Supper should be the joyous end to the convert's path towards church membership rather than an aid on the way. This is, of course, rather a different issue from that of open and closed communion. If this view is adopted the Lord's Table is open to all who are in membership with any church—Baptist or otherwise.

It would appear, then, that although Baptists hold more closely to the classical order than most, the last two elements in the process of Christian Initiation must be open to further discussion amongst us.

We understand there is a good chance that a Baptist book about Baptism will be published in the spring of next year. This is indeed good news. No doubt it will provoke considerable discussion and that is an even better prospect! In any such discussion, however, it is to be hoped that a concept such as the process of the initiatory rite will be taken into consideration for we owe it to ourselves and to other denominations to try to understand their categories as well as our own. This journal will hope to publish articles on relevant points raised by discussion on baptism and entry into the church when the present series on *Baptists and the Ministry* is concluded.

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In this connection, it is regretted than the article in the series planned for January, has had to be held over until April, and we shall take the opportunity in the January issue of publishing a full length article dealing with recent research on the Anabaptist Movement. The January issue will also contain a new feature in which Neville Clark will be commenting on new theological publications.

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