
Baptism and Communion in Contemporary Thought and Proposal

by Ronald A. Ward

This is Dr. Ward's first contribution to our pages; if we had been more attentive to our editorial responsibilities, we should have persuaded him to contribute many years ago. After teaching New Testament first in Spurgeon's College and then in the London College of Divinity, Dr. Ward crossed the Atlantic to become Professor of New Testament in Wycliffe College, Toronto (in succession to Dr. Coggan). He now lives in retirement in St. Stephen, New Brunswick.

WHAT is a Christian? How does one become a Christian? It might be thought that these are simple questions with obvious answers, obvious at any rate to evangelicals. But in the church at large, among the mass of people whose names are on the church roll, there is considerable confusion. The gospel and its interpretation, and the pastoral care of the people, are directed towards stating the answers; but in the confusion about the questions there is misunderstanding about what the church actually does and even about our standing as Christians.

In consequence there has been much talk of "Christian Initiation." It is said that the term describes the sacramental acts, seen in the New Testament, whereby the saving work of our Lord is applied to us. The acts are three. (a) By grace and not by merit *baptism* makes a person a member of Christ. (b) In the *laying-on-of-hands* or confirmation God confirms His gift in baptism by an additional gift, the Holy Spirit, and the believing recipient responds in self-dedication to the Lord. (c) In the *first communion* the faithful receive the Body and Blood of Christ (presumably for the first time). Thus the Christian life is begun; it is constantly sustained, strengthened and encouraged by repeated communion services.

It is held that these three sacraments of Christian Initiation essentially convey what God does and that they demand the response of commitment. All three are necessary for a person to be a full participant in the Christian Community.

It all sounds very "churchy" and evangelicals will be quick to point out the absence of the preaching of the word and the response of faith. The Lord's saving work is applied to us before the sacraments as well as in them. But wait a minute; others may be involved no less than the "churchy."

I learn on high authority that in every part of the Christian world today, in most of the world-wide churches (i.e. non-episcopal as well

as episcopal), answers are being sought within the framework of scripture and tradition to two main questions: how can the pattern, baptism, laying-on-of-hands and first communion, best emphasize that we join God's family by *grace* (and not by merit or works) and that we respond to what God has *already* done for us; and how in practical pastoral ministry can we demonstrate the love of God? In brief: by applying the "pattern" to those who have neither merit nor works nor faith.

I further learn of a fact which has led me to write this article. If it were a matter limited to the churches of the episcopal persuasion, it would be a domestic affair of theirs and not of main general concern. But it is said that in most of the world-wide churches the consensus of opinion is that children who come to baptism should also receive the laying-on-of-hands and the communion. Baptism, confirmation and the Lord's Supper are all combined in one and the same service: a veritable telescope manufactured for infants. It is expected that children thus treated will grow normally into the Christian Community.

Why should they? Very many who have been baptized in infancy fall out of the race at once—this is the price paid for indiscriminate baptism. Of those who do go on to confirmation at the age of twelve, thirteen or fourteen, many likewise are seen in the church no more. On what grounds, other than a crude mechanization of sacraments, could it be argued that an unconscious infant who has been given bread and wine will normally grow into the church? The suggested "reform," which seems to arise from panic rather than from sound theological and biblical argument, goes backwards rather than forwards. It points to a dubious form of self-perpetuation rather than to an aggressive evangelistic outreach.

We must look at baptism and the Lord's Supper as we see them in the New Testament.

1. The *fundamental orders* to the church are given in Matt. 28: 19-20. "Go and disciple all the nations, baptizing them into the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." Two points should be observed. The command of the risen Lord is found in all manuscripts and versions (see the valuable discussion of C.S.C. Williams, *Alterations to the Text of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts*, p. 33). And whatever the critics and commentators say, *le texte subsiste*. The church professes to be bound by the scripture.

2. How the command was obeyed we see in the *perspective and priority* of the apostle Paul. When he was at Corinth he did indeed baptize but his remembrance of the occasions was vague (1 Cor. 1: 14-17). Many of the Corinthians were baptized (Acts 18: 8) but not by Paul. He could recall only a handful. But his perspective was sound and his priorities right. Christ had sent him not to baptize

but to preach the gospel; to preach rather than to baptize. Like Peter Acts 10: 48), he committed the baptizing to fellow-workers. Prior to baptism in both time and importance is the preaching of the gospel.

3. When we examine the *New Testament practice* we notice a striking fluidity or lack of uniformity. There seems to be no rigid pattern corresponding at every point to that of baptism-confirmation-first communion, In fact six different patterns may be discerned, in which the sequence of events should be observed.

First to be noticed is the simple *faith plus baptism*. Many of the Corinthians were believing and being baptized (Acts 18: 8). Similar to this is the experience of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 36, 38).

Secondly, an extension of this is seen in the *faith plus baptism plus first communion* of Acts 2: 41-42. "They received his word, were baptized . . . and persevered in the breaking of bread." No emphasis is laid on the first communion as part of Christian Initiation but there must have been a first time when each convert broke bread.

In a third pattern the extension diverges on to another route, *faith plus baptism plus laying-on-of-hands plus reception of the Holy Spirit* (Acts 19: 5-6). At Ephesus the men who had received the baptism of John the Baptist learnt that they were committed to faith in Jesus and were baptized; Paul laid his hands on them and the Holy Spirit came upon them. Apart from the longer interval between the initial faith and baptism and the subsequent laying-on-of-hands and the reception of the Holy Spirit, the pattern is the same at Samaria (Acts 8: 12-17).

We now observe, fourthly, a reversal of order, *faith plus laying-on-of-hands plus reception of the Holy Spirit plus baptism* (Acts 9: 17-18). The reception of the Holy Spirit is an inference but it is justified. Ananias told the new convert, Saul of Tarsus, after laying his hands on him, that the Lord, the Jesus of the road to Damascus, had sent him to Saul "in order that you may recover your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit." He did recover his sight and the Lord's purpose did not fail. Which is easier, to *speak* of recovery of sight or to *speak* of the reception of the Spirit? We know that Saul received the Spirit because we know that he received his sight. The argument is analogous to that of Mark 2: 9-11.

The reversal appears even more starkly, fifthly, in the order *faith plus reception of the Holy Spirit plus baptism* (Acts 10: 44-11: 1). The gentiles had received the Word of God and the Holy Spirit. Could anybody forbid water to prevent their baptism?

Finally a situation is envisaged in which the order is the bare *faith plus reception of the Holy Spirit* (Acts 19: 2). Did you receive the Holy Spirit "when you became believers"? This is the rendering of Goodspeed and of the New English Bible and it goes back at least

as far as Alford. It was left to J. H. Moulton (*Prolegomena*, p. 131) to remark that "the coincident aorist participle is doctrinally important." The same emphasis on faith is apparent in Acts 11: 17 and Galatians 3: 2.

4. We pass now to comments and reflections on the New Testament practice. *First*, baptism is administered to converts. To say this is not necessarily to become a Baptist. It is a fact which is at last commonly recognized and its interdenominational recognition is documented by G. R. Beasley-Murray (*Baptism in the New Testament*, p. 274). New academic theory is paralleled by long ecclesiastical practice: even the most enthusiastic of catholics baptizes converts on the mission field at home or abroad.

Secondly, the sacramental act is not mechanical in its result. Simon Magus "believed" (the inverted commas are important comment) and was baptized (Acts 8: 13) but even so had no part or lot in the business. He had not "got off the ground," as he still needed repentance and forgiveness (Acts 8: 21-22). He was accordingly "solemnly excluded" in words which are "a form of excommunication" (E. Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 305).

Thirdly, baptism brings inner faith out into the open. It tells the story of a man's experience of Christ (cp. Romans 6: 1-11). It brings all his previous attitudes of faith into a focus. It therefore gives a witness. Why should the candidate submit to being baptized? It is because he is under new ownership. "Jesus is Lord." Why does the church baptize him? It is because it recognizes faith and obeys the Lord.

Thus baptism is the *public* initiation of those who have already in the privacy of their faith been initiated into Christ. The saving work of Christ has already been applied to them.

5. At this point something must be said about infant baptism. The present article and the pages of THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY are not the place in which to attack or defend the practice. But given the fact of it, some interpretation of it ought to be given. There are three main views: the mystical, the rational and the proleptic.

According to the mystical theory baptized babies receive "instant regeneration," by the mere fact of being baptized. Anybody who is baptized is at once regenerated. This does not fit the case of Simon Magus and is an embarrassment in the modern world. Hitler and Stalin were undoubtedly baptized. Either they were not thereby regenerated or, if they were, regeneration is not worth having. Perhaps "regeneration" is being here used with an inappropriate implication of religious experience.

Hence arises the rational theory. The baptized baby goes out from the service (or is taken out) in precisely the same condition as that in which he was brought in. But in virtue of his baptism he is brought

into the environment of the church. All the doors of its fellowship are now open to him, of which the first is probably the Sunday School. This is much more reasonable and realistic. Unfortunately realism compels us to point out that scores of infants and children are brought into the environment of the church without being baptized. They pass from Sunday School to youth group or Bible Class and attend the Sunday services of worship. It may be that nobody realizes that they have not been baptized. Unbaptized as they are, they are subject to all the warmth and influence of the church fellowship.

The proleptic view is more satisfactory. Infant baptism is a sign of what God in Christ has done on the cross and of what He offers to men in the gospel. In word and deed it flings wide the door of salvation, which stays open for the child to enter when he has come to "years of discretion."

Baptists will not be convinced by this and I am not trying to rebut their criticisms. But it seems that infant baptism, though under fire today from the very people who practise it, will continue. In one of the oldest and most prestigious universities on the other (European) side of the Atlantic, whose school of theology includes most if not all denominations, the episcopalian students openly admit to their Baptist classmates that the Baptist position is right. When asked if infant baptism is therefore to be abandoned they reply in the negative. "The people in the parishes would never stand it." In such an open situation an over-emphasis on infant baptism would be theologically indefensible and strategically absurd. And yet it is seriously suggested that babies should be baptized, confirmed and given the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper in one and the same service.

6. Two main criticisms may be aimed at the proposal, one logical and the other biblical. Take the logical one first. If sacraments are so effective, why stop at baptism and the communion service? Why not make a suitable match and solemnize an infant marriage? Matrimonial grace will ensure that the marriage will endure. Why not ordain some of the male infants? The grace of orders will give them twenty years of preparation for their actual ministry. The logic is sound, the conclusions unacceptable.

From the biblical point of view it ought to be remembered that there is a pattern for the communion service, not always realized but still there. Each person who comes to the Lord's Table has a fourfold obligation. (a) He should *test* himself. "Let a man (an individual, not merely the church at large) examine himself" (1 Cor. 11: 28). (b) He should *take*. "Take, eat" (Matt. 26: 26). These imperatives rule out anything in the nature of intravenous feeding or forcible feeding. The communicant must take what he is offered.

(c) He should *remember*. "Do this in remembrance of Me" (Luke 22: 19; 1 Cor. 11: 24). The act must be motivated and not be that of a man walking in his sleep. (d) He should *discern*. He eats and drinks condemnation to himself if he does not "distinguish the body" from what would otherwise be mere bread and wine or a mere collection of men and women (1 Cor. 11: 29). The New Testament is not here speaking lightly. Disobedience could mean illness or even death.

Test; take; remember; discern: can babies do this?

The church has already gone back to the limit in its sacramental dealing with infants. It should now go forward and ensure that the gospel is preached and taught to all, far and near, inside and outside of the visible church. Then when men have come in repentance and faith to our Saviour Christ they will be initiated in their hearts, for they will have given themselves to Him; and they can be publicly initiated into the family of God in ceremonies which truly reflect their inner response to Him and His mercy.

St. Stephen, New Brunswick, Canada