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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

THE
INDIAN
JOURNAL
OF
THEOLOGY

Articles on Christian Initiation

The Christian Faith and Natural
Science

Catholic Missions in the
Early Centuries

Volume Three Number One

March 1954

The Rites of Christian Initiation

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Differences in the faith and practice among Churches relating to Christian initiation constitute some of the most difficult problems of the divided Church. There is no unanimity of opinion about the right mode of baptism, whether it should be by immersion, affusion or sprinkling. There is also a diversity of views about the rightness or otherwise of infant baptism. The relation between baptism and confirmation has been another matter of controversy. Underlying the different views are differences of understanding of the meaning of Christian initiation. The modern ecumenical and Church Union movements have created a fresh interest in the study of Christian initiation among both the 'Catholic' and the 'evangelical' Churches, not only with a view to greater mutual understanding and closer fellowship but also to a clearer understanding within each Church about the significance of the initiation rites.

Systematic instruction of the congregations on this question is also a great pastoral need today. One often discovers in India, and perhaps in other countries too, that many evangelists and catechists responsible for the instruction of village congregations have very little understanding of the sacraments. The result is that congregations easily fall prey to sectarian propaganda and many are disturbed in their minds about the need for re-baptism to be sure of their salvation.

Now, many books and articles have been written in recent times on baptism and confirmation; one of the most significant being the study by Professor G. W. H. Lampe.¹ While revealing the complexity of the problems involved, these studies also show that differences and agreements on the questions cut across confessional boundaries, as in the case of most theological issues today. The key to the understanding of the problems is the New Testament conception of membership in the Church.

This article does not attempt to solve any of the problems involved. It only seeks to state some views on the issues of Christian initiation. In addition to the books I have read on the subject I am also indebted to a discussion we had some time ago at a Faculty meeting of the United Theological College, Bangalore, on a questionnaire sent by the Liturgy Committee of the Church of South India.

Meaning of Baptism

Most non-Christian religions have initiation ceremonies, but no religion gives such depth of meaning as the New Testament gives to Christian Baptism.

¹ G. W. H. Lampe: *The Seal of the Spirit*. Longmans. 1951.

In order to understand the meaning of Christian Baptism, we should first look at the Jewish proselyte-baptism and the baptism of John. It has been shown that the proselyte-baptism among the Jews was symbolic of the passage of the Red Sea. 'The converted stranger must enter the 'promised land' as Israel had done through water.'¹ In John's baptism we see more than a mere repetition of proselyte-baptism. Professor Lampe has pointed out that John was more influenced by the teaching of the Old Testament prophets who called the people to repentance using the figures of washing, sprinkling of clean water and the like.² John's warning about judgment and his reference to a future baptism with the Holy Spirit reflect some of the Jewish expectations based on prophetic teaching. 'The baptism of John was an act of prophetic symbolism expressive of the cleansing of a faithful Remnant in preparation for the expected baptism of Spirit and fire in the Messianic Age.'³

The Christian baptism, according to the New Testament, is the symbolic expression of the fulfilment of the prophetic expectations and the dawning of the new age in Christ. The New Testament writers are all agreed that those who believe in Christ are constituted into a Community which participates in a life radically different from anything known by the Old Israel. 'The least in the Kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist.'⁴ 'The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.'⁵ 'If a man is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.'⁶ Baptism is the symbol of the initiation into the new life. St. Paul speaks of baptism as incorporation into Christ, into His death and into His resurrection.⁷ Christ is the centre of the new life.

Now, while adopting baptism as the symbol of the initiation into the new age, the Christian Church was guided by the faith that the rite had received new content and meaning by the baptism of Jesus. Though it was the baptism of John which He received, He did not receive it in the same way as others. Others received the baptism for the remission of their sins. Jesus needed no remission of sins. By receiving the baptism He was identifying Himself with that section of sinful humanity which was seeking remission of sins. And that act was accompanied by the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Him, which is the differentia of Christian baptism from the baptism of John. The baptism of Jesus combines both water baptism and spirit baptism, symbolizing both the liberation from bondage to sin and the gift of the New Life.

The mystery of this differentia of the Christian baptism cannot be fully expressed by words. But some aspects of this mystery need to be emphasized. Matthew says that Jesus received John's baptism in order 'to fulfil all righteousness.'⁸ God's righteousness is fulfilled in the forgiveness of sins and the redemption of man. Jesus' baptism was for the redemption of all, and pre-figured His suffering and death, and the resurrection and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon all believers. Jesus' identification with the solidarity of His people and the coming of the Holy Spirit are intimately related. Herein is also the mystery of the

¹ G. W. H. Lampe: op. cit. p. 24.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 26-32.

⁴ Mtt. 11:11.

⁶ 2 Cor. 5:17—cp. Eph. 2:10.

⁸ Mtt. 3:15—See O. Cullman: Baptism in the New Testament. S. C. M. Press. p. 18ff. W. F. Flemington: The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism. p. 30ff. G. W. H. Lampe: op. cit. pp. 37ff.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁵ John 1:17.

⁷ Rom. 6:3.

in which it is clothed. The plea of Dr. Bultmann is that we do not confuse the inescapable 'offence of the cross' with the unnecessary offence of asking modern man to accept mythological forms which mean nothing to him. He has therefore sought to lay bare the essential difference between the thought world of biblical times and that of the man of today. This difference he finds largely in the use of 'myth' which is for ancient man the natural way to express what he understands to be happening to him, so that such explanations as those of demon possession or miracle appear to him the only way to set out what cannot otherwise be explained. On the other hand to modern man 'nature miracles are no longer a means of faith but a problem for faith'.

In the book before us, Dr. Steege has discussed the definition of 'Myth' citing the evidence of a psychologist like Jung as well as of students of religion and systematic theologians. He finds in the mode of man's self consciousness the key to all his understanding of being in general and finds the great difference between the ancient and modern thought worlds in the fact that in the former a man did not in effect distinguish between himself and the external, between the transcendent and the immanent, the personal and the impersonal, while in the latter such distinctions are second nature. He criticizes Dr. Bultmann for not being sufficiently clear on the relation between understanding of the self and of the external world and considers that the existentialist philosophy is inadequate for an investigation of the problems involved.

These problems he discusses from the point of view of the theory of knowledge. While recognizing his main distinction between modern 'differentiating' man and ancient 'identified' man, Steege admits that even today there are many who still think in mythological terms; but for those who do not, he seeks to expound the means by which religious truth comes home to them. Here he begins on familiar ground when he argues that the mere exercise of sensory observation and rational reflection, effective for scientific knowledge of the external world, is not the means by which we lay hold on significant religious knowledge. If it were, then the non-believer who mastered the information provided would be as much at home in the Gospel truth as the believer, and indeed the devil himself is reputed to be an accomplished and highly orthodox theologian! The fact is, however, that religious truth to be appropriated requires an act of acceptance and decision which involves the whole personality, the complete abandonment of the impartial 'spectator' attitude which is necessary for scientific observation. It demands faith. Steege thus argues that the assurance of religious truth lies on the side of the intuitive, subjective aspect of our nature.

From this angle he elaborates his theory of knowledge on the basis of earlier work by Seeberg, and finally offers as an adequate expression for the means of religious knowledge the word 'Autognosis,' signifying knowledge which is not rational so much as similar to that by which we know another person, and which wholly involves the personality of the knower. Such knowledge does not lack objective validity, for it comes to us in the form of an encounter, when the transcendence of God becomes immanent to us, for it is part of the nature of man that he is capable of thus encountering the transcendent.

The writer is clearly entering a field of significant enquiry, which has been opened up by the existentialist philosophers and which, among Christian theologians, Prof. Karl Heim has made peculiarly his own.

essential mission of the Holy Spirit, namely, the bringing together of *holiness* and *Koinonia*, which according to human notions are contrary to each other. Christian baptism is thus not merely an individual experience of the person baptized. The individual is certainly assured of the benefits of Jesus' baptism, but he also identifies himself with the whole company of believers and commits himself to a life of fellowship with them. There is no longer any room for self-righteousness. There is only the righteousness of Christ manifested by the power of the Holy Spirit in the fellowship of believers who own one another and bear one another's burdens. Every single Christian baptism is, therefore, an act of the whole Church. The Church receives the individual and the individual receives the Church, the Body of Christ. Even though baptism is not always accompanied by spectacular incidents like glossolalia, in so far as a person accepts the fellowship of the Church at baptism he is baptized with the Holy Spirit.

Another point that needs to be emphasized is that, in the New Testament, membership in the Church is described as a new covenant. The idea of the Covenant is the key to the Biblical understanding of man's relation to God. God has made a covenant with His people. In the Old Testament, the prophets teach that even when the people are faithless and go after other gods, Yahveh never breaks the covenant. He is always faithful and not only meets His people with judgment, but also redeems them showing love and mercy. The new covenant made with the blood of Christ is even more decisive than the old covenant. Baptism is the affirmation of this covenant and because of God's faithfulness it is an act performed once for all for each person. The only necessary character of the rite is the intention of incorporation into the Body of Christ, i.e. the Church, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Defects in the mode of baptism do not affect God's faithfulness. Any suggestion, therefore, of re-baptism means questioning God's faithfulness and amounts to blasphemy.

Infant Baptism and Believers' Baptism

In the conversations between Churches one of the major problems is created by the rejection of infant baptism by some confessions as contrary to the New Testament conception of Christian initiation.¹ Ecumenical discussions on the subject have not so far produced any agreed statement. The schemes for Church Union in Ceylon and in North India recognize both infant baptism and believers' baptism as equally valid practices in the United Church.

It is not easy to give any conclusive arguments from the New Testament for or against any one particular practice. Obviously, in the N.T. we come across only believers' baptism. This was the only possibility, because the Gospel was being preached for the first time and only those who believed could be baptized. It is not right to seek for evidence for infant baptism in the N.T. as some have done choosing one or two obscure passages. It is equally wrong to defend believers' baptism on the ground that infant baptism is not mentioned.

Those who insist on believers' baptism emphasize the conscious acceptance of Christ as a condition of baptism. Karl Barth argues that

¹ See 'More conversations between Lutherans, Baptists and the C.S.I.—C.L.S. 1950. p. 22.

Baptism in the New Testament is a matter of the *cognitio* of salvation and as it is impossible for an infant to have knowledge of Christ's death and resurrection, infant baptism should be abandoned.¹ Those who reject infant baptism are right in their concern for avoiding the use of baptism as a magical or merely symbolic rite. But they are in danger of making baptism depend too much on the human response. In the New Testament baptism was not given as a reward of man's belief. On the contrary, it was an expression of God's objective gift of salvation to man and man's acceptance of that gift. Further, the rite will not become a purely magical rite as long as it is performed as a sacrament of the whole congregation which takes responsibility for the faith of the infant.

It should also be emphasized that baptism took place at the beginning of a man's Christian life and not at the culmination. In the case of children born to Christian parents it is difficult to say at what point his Christian faith begins, and so it is only proper to give baptism at infancy. It is the acceptance of the child's birth into the Christian household. Infant baptism is the symbolic or sacramental recognition of an objective fact. Quoting the evidence collected by J. Jeremias, Professor O. Cullmann points out that in the Judaism of N.T. times the children born to proselytes after they had been received were accepted as Israelites without the proselyte-baptism. It was, therefore, possible that the children of Christian parents were not baptized in later life.² It is, however, known that not long after the Apostolic Age infant baptism was regularly practised in the early Church. Writing in the second century, Tertullian speaks of the dangers of infant baptism and argues against it.³ His argument suggests that in his time infant baptism had been practised long enough to be abused.

While the practice of infant baptism is an effective way of safeguarding the objectivity of salvation in the Church, churches should also constantly remind themselves of the danger of the sacrament becoming a magical rite without real spiritual power. Infant baptism is meaningful only if the infant is really brought up in the environment of Christian faith. Either the parents or other sponsors representing the Church should take responsibility for the faith of the infants. Where one is not sure of such sponsorship, infant baptism should not be practised. Any policy in this matter should also be guided by the faith that if the infant is brought up in close touch with the fellowship of the Church, he will come within the influence of the Holy Spirit Who is not bound by our rules and regulations but works in different people in different ways according to their need.

Whether it be an infant or an adult who is baptized, what takes place is the initiation into the family of Christ. There is no real qualitative difference between the two. The view expressed by F. J. Leenhardt that infant baptism is fundamentally a different sacrament from adult baptism is not consistent with the New Testament.⁴ The difference lies only in the apprehensive powers of the recipients. An adult is capable of consciously responding to the work of the Holy Spirit; the infant is not capable of this. But it would be wrong to say that the Holy Spirit operates only in the adult. It is also wrong to think in terms of quantita-

¹ K. Barth: The Teaching of the Church regarding Baptism.

² O. Cullmann: op. cit. p. 25. G. W. H. Lampe: op. cit. p. 93.

³ On Baptism: Ch. 18.

⁴ O. Cullman: op. cit. p. 28-29.

tive reception of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is personal. Though there can be degrees of obedience to the Holy Spirit, it is not proper to think in terms of receiving the Holy Spirit in differing measures. The Holy Spirit works in all His fullness both in the infant and in the adult. Further, it is not any biological taint that is washed away at baptism. Baptism is rather the admission into a new environment and the beginning of a new life. One is brought to the realm of redemption where the Holy Spirit is operative. So there is only one theology of Baptism. The baptism of the believer is the norm and the basis for the theology of infant baptism as well.

Baptism and Confirmation

The Eastern Orthodox Churches regarded baptism as the sacrament of full initiation into the membership of the Church and did not separate the service of confirmation from the service of baptism. Any one who is baptized is baptized as a full member of the Church and can receive communion from the very beginning. The question of when a baptized member begins to join in communion is purely a matter of pastoral convenience. No theological significance is given to the time when a person receives his first Communion as distinct from the time of baptism.

In the West, however, the practice of infant baptism led to the institution of a separate service of confirmation. There is no uniform doctrine of confirmation even in the West. In the Catholic tradition, confirmation is by the laying on of hands by the Bishop, and it is at confirmation that one receives the Holy Spirit, and becomes a full member of the Church. Confirmation is sometimes spoken of as Spirit Baptism as distinct from the water baptism received in infancy. It has been described as *the seal of the Holy Spirit*. In the so-called Non-Conformist Churches there are services corresponding to confirmation for reception into full membership, but any ordained minister can 'receive the member.' They have no fixed doctrine of the relation between baptism and confirmation. The main question, however, with regard to confirmation is whether there is any justification for believing in a separate rite for the initial reception of the Holy Spirit other than Baptism.

Professor Lampe's study has thrown much valuable light on the development of the practice of confirmation. The following are his main conclusions:¹

1. There is no justification for the view held by some that a separate outward and visible ceremony other than water baptism was necessary in the same way as circumcision was necessary after proselyte baptism. Professor Cullmann shows that in the New Testament Baptism is the rite equivalent to the Jewish circumcision and that no other external rite was practised.²

2. In the early Church, Baptism, laying on of hands and the first communion were all integral parts of one rite. They were not separate services. Baptism and confirmation formed one united rite of Christian initiation.³

¹ Op. cit. pp. 306-322.

² Op. cit. pp. 57ff.

³ Professor F. L. Cross also emphasizes this point in his Introduction to St. Cyril of Jerusalem's Lectures on Christian Sacraments (London, S.P.C.K. 1951) pp. xxv, xxx-xxxii. For Cyril Baptism is the 'holy indissoluble seal' (Pro-catechesis, 16), and conveys to us the gift of the Holy Spirit (Mystagogical Catechesis, 20. 6).

3. At a relatively early date the ceremony of Baptism was 'embellished with various other symbolical actions', the most significant of them being chrismation, consignation and the laying on of hands. These were symbolic ways of expressing that 'in Baptism the believer is made a member of Christ and a sharer in His Messianic character.'

4. With the growth of the Church in numbers presbyteral Baptism was allowed, but the functions of consignation and laying on of hands were reserved by the Bishop. A doctrine of confirmation then developed to rationalize the division of the rite of initiation. At Baptism there is an initial gift of the Holy Spirit. At Confirmation is given the gift of the Spirit for strengthening and equipping for spiritual warfare. In the Catholic Church, confirmation began to be regarded as a separate sacrament. Sometimes Confirmation was regarded as a sacrament of even greater significance than Baptism.

5. The Reformers helped to restore the full and proper significance of Baptism as the sacrament of the bestowal of the Spirit. Confirmation came to be regarded as the 'means of supplying the response of faith which is required in Baptism, but cannot be made in the case of infants. The emphasis came to be laid increasingly upon the catechetical rather than the sacramental aspect of confirmation.'

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On the basis of this study it should be concluded that Christian initiation should be regarded as a single event with a three-fold experience, viz. Conversion, Baptism, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The separation of infant baptism from confirmation is a pure pastoral necessity without any serious theological significance. Confirmation is only a way of helping the person to apprehend the full meaning and implications of the Baptism he has received. In the case of adults, baptism and confirmation should not be separated but should be parts of the same service.

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In saying this I am, of course, abandoning any pretence at speaking from a position of neutrality among the conflicting ecclesiologies with which we have to deal. I cannot so speak, for I believe that the divinely willed form of the Church's unity is at least this, a visible company in every place of all who confess Jesus as Lord, abiding together in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and the prayers. Its foci are the word, the sacraments and the apostolic ministry. Its form is the visible fellowship, not of those whom we choose out to be our friends, but of those whom God has actually given to us as our neighbours. It is, therefore, simply humanity in every place re-created in Christ. It is the place where *all* men can be made one, because all are made nothing, where one new humanity in Christ is being daily renewed because the old man in *every* man is being brought to crucifixion through word, baptism and supper. Its unity is universal, because it is local and congregational.—Newbigin: *The Household of God*.