

APPROPRIATE RITES OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION

Since the first International Anglican Liturgical Consultation in Boston (1985), baptism has been accepted as the sacramental sign of full incorporation into the church; and the only prerequisite for receiving communion. The Consultation's recommendations were endorsed by the 1988 Lambeth Conference.¹ Since baptism alone was confirmed as the basis for communion, children of all ages have been receiving the Eucharist. Now, however, the case for 'believers' baptism' – the Anabaptist argument – is once again being made in the Church.

With the elevation of baptism from a life-stage pastoral office to the sacrament uniting Christ with his people, a movement has begun to return to an intentional process of catechumenical formation leading to baptism and discipleship. The presumption is that inquirers would be adults.² Children could be baptized provided that their parents or guardians could provide for them a Christian household; which the Rev. Canon John Hill, a leading proponent of The Catechumenate, has defined as one "whose daily life is so shaped by the Christian story, Christian prayer, and Christian assumptions that a young child growing up there cannot even imagine not being a Christian".³ This presumes that the children's sponsors are themselves baptized, having undergone appropriate catechumenical formation.⁴ The Christian household is not merely one in which the parents happen to be churchgoers.⁵

¹ Colin Buchanan, Confirmation, in David R. Holetson, ed., "Growing in Newness of Life", (Toronto: The Anglican Book Centre, 1993), 114-116.

² For information on the catechumenate see The Catechumenate: Forming the Body of Christ in the 21st Century, (Toronto: The Associated Parishes for Liturgy and Mission) available from <http://www.associatedparishes.org>.

³ The Rev. Canon John W.B. Hill, What Meaning has Infant Baptism in a post-Christendom World?, unpublished essay.

⁴ The Catechumenate, 13.

⁵ Hill, op. cit.

Rev. Hill proposes that the baptism of children should be the exception, not the norm⁶. Children, after all, are unable to substantiate, and give a valid account for, their belief. Since the Anglican Church subscribes to the doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone, the proposals of the Catechumenate Network appear to make sense. Coming to faith is described as a process of discernment, formation, and conversion, culminating in a desire to be baptized and join the Christian community.⁷ Clearly such a process is beyond the capability of a child.

Since the acceptance of baptism as the only rite of initiation, confirmation has fallen into disuse. After all, if the baptized were able to receive communion what was the need for another rite? However, the consequences of the new intention of baptism, making an informed adult decision for Christ, were not fully explored; perhaps because it did not have an immediate effect on those of us who were already initiated, or on our children who were already baptized as infants. As events later unfolded, the decision to de-emphasize confirmation may have much to do with the position the Church finds itself in today. Church membership is in decline. In many parishes Sunday schools are struggling, or have disappeared altogether. Young adults – Generation X and the Millennials – are conspicuous by their absence. Seniors predominate in many congregations.

In the present circumstances, it is appropriate to ask “Did we throw out the baby with the baptismal water when we discontinued the practice of confirmation?”; and further, “Should the baptism of children be the exception rather than the rule?” Let me first address the question of baptizing children.

Martin Luther, the architect of Justification by Faith alone, has an important perspective on child baptism. His argument is summarized in

⁶ Hill, op. cit.

⁷ The Catechumenate, 5-8.

the following statement from the document, *Concerning Rebaptism* (1528): *A Letter of Martin Luther to Two Pastors*.⁸ :

*Our baptism, thus, is a strong and sure foundation, affirming that God has made a covenant with all the world to be a God of the heathen in all the world, as the gospel says. Also, that Christ has commanded the gospel to be preached in all the world, as also the prophets have declared in many ways. As a sign of this covenant he has instituted baptism, commanded and enjoined upon all heathen, as Matt.[28:19] declares: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father," etc. In the same manner he had made a covenant with Abraham and his descendants to be their God, and made circumcision a sign of this covenant. Here, namely, that we are baptized; not because we are certain of our faith but because it is the command and will of God. For even if I were never certain any more of faith, I still am certain of the command of God, that God has bidden to baptize, for this he has made known throughout the world. In this I cannot err, for God's command cannot deceive. But of my faith he has never said anything to anyone, nor issued an order or command concerning it. True, one should add faith to baptism. But we are not to base baptism on faith.*⁹

Luther draws a direct analogy between circumcision and baptism as the sign of a covenant relationship with God. Just as circumcision was the sign of the Old Covenant, baptism is the sign of the New Covenant. Jonathan Trigg, notes that Luther speaks of the two covenants as one, even though the signs have changed.¹⁰ He therefore believes we are entitled to interpret God's instruction to Abraham and his descendents to circumcise male infants (Gen 17:12) to also hold for the baptism of infants under the New Covenant.¹¹ To those who say that there is no specific scriptural reference to a command to baptise children, Luther replies:

⁸ Martin Luther, *Concerning Rebaptism* (1528): *A Letter of Martin Luther to Two Pastors*, In Editor, Timothy F. Lull, and William R. Russell Second Edition Editor. *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 239-258.

⁹ Ibid, 253

¹⁰ Jonathan D. Trigg, *Baptism in the Theology of Martin Luther*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994)

¹¹ *ibid*, 41.

*I answer, neither has he specifically commanded the baptism of adults, nor of men or of women, so we had better not baptize anybody. But he has commanded us to baptize all Gentiles, none excepted, when he said, "Go and baptize all heathen in my name," etc. (Matt. 28[:19]). Now children constitute a great part of the heathen.*¹²

Concerning faith as a prerequisite for baptism, Luther notes that baptism is a work of God – a divine work. It is not invented by man but commanded by God and witnessed to by the gospel.¹³ As Trigg notes, Luther holds it to be permanently valid without human factors.¹⁴ He holds baptism to be the first sign of grace, followed by the word and the eucharist. Primacy, however is not centrality. The major part of Luther's argument centres on right understanding of the relationship between faith and what that faith has to grasp. For Luther *fides infantium* can be advanced because the major place is not given to faith but to the means of grace.¹⁵ He believes that the sacrament of baptism, rests on the words of promise and command – the dominical words – grounded in the divine warrant for baptism in MT 28:19¹⁶ and Mk 16:16¹⁷.

Thus Luther can say: "...whoever bases baptism on faith and baptizes on chance and not on certainty that faith is present does nothing better than he who baptized him who has no faith."¹⁸ And further:

I maintain as I have written in the Postil that the most certain form of baptism is child baptism. For an adult might deceive and come to Christ as a Judas and have himself baptized. But a child cannot deceive. He comes to Christ in baptism, as John came to him, and as the children were brought to him, that his word and work might be effective in them, move them, and make them holy, because his

¹² Luther, Concerning Rebaptism, in Lull, 248.

¹³ *ibid*, 245.

¹⁴ Trigg, 2.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 106.

¹⁶ Mt. 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, NRSV

¹⁷ Mk. 16:16 The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. NRSV.

¹⁸ Luther, Concerning Rebaptism, in Lull, 248.

Word and work cannot be without fruit. Yet it has this effect alone in the child."¹⁹

It is enough for Luther that the parents, godparents, or broader congregation have faith - his defence of *fides aliena* - because faith itself is not the guarantor of the sacrament. In fact, it does not matter whether the child has faith as long as the words were spoken and all that pertains to baptism was done as fully as if faith were present.²⁰ As he says, "faith does not exist for the sake of baptism, but baptism for the sake of faith. When faith comes baptism is complete."²¹

Perhaps Luther was most cogent, and at his most pastoral, when he said:

*... child baptism derives from the apostles and has been practised since the days of the apostles. We cannot oppose it, but must let it continue, since no one has yet been able to prove that in baptism children do not believe or that such baptism is wrong. For even if I were not sure that they believed, yet for my conscience's sake I would have to let them be baptized. I would much rather allow them baptism than to keep them from it. For if, as we believe, baptism is right and useful and brings the children to salvation, and I then did away with it, then I would be responsible for all the children who were lost because they were unbaptized - a cruel and terrible thing. If baptism is not right, that is, without value or help to the children, then I would be guilty of no greater sin than the Word of God had been spoken and his sign given in vain. I would not be responsible for the loss of any soul, but only of an ineffectual use of the Word and sign of God.*²²

For me, Luther's argument is determinative; and, as has been noted above, pastoral. Perhaps by insisting on too much catechumenical formation we have driven away families who were willing to hear our message - not yet believers, but willing to embark on the journey. As Michael Green noted, New Testament churches had no *catechumenate* or probationary period. People who have entered into the covenant were

¹⁹ Luther, Concerning Rebaptism, in Lull, 248.

²⁰ *ibid*, 249.

²¹ *ibid*.

²² *ibid*, 254.

NOT made to wait for its sign and seal; but where baptized the moment they professed faith in Jesus as Lord.²³

Children were admitted into the Old Testament Church,²⁴ and were given the sign of the covenant, circumcision, at 8 days old (Gen 17: 10-14, 21:4). Children born into a believing home therefore had right of belonging.²⁵ In the New Testament, on the Day of Pentecost some 3,000 souls who came to Christ were baptized. Peter said, "The promise is to you and your children" when he challenged his hearers to baptism (Acts 2:38-41). Whole families were baptized when the head of the household converted.²⁶ Moreover, the Church continued to baptize children, as can be seen in the writings of Polycarp, Origen, Irenaeus, and Justin Martyr.

The issue is that if we do baptize children, are we not still concerned about them making an adult profession of faith? To me, that is the appropriate role of confirmation.

Confirmation has been part of the tradition the Anglican Church from its beginning; and the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church since the 3rd Century CE.²⁷ It is not the Rite of Initiation in the tradition. That prerogative does belong to baptism. Nor is it a supplementary rite. Rather, traditionally, it is the Christian parallel to the *Bar Mitzvah*; the rite of passage in the Jewish tradition in which a youth, at age 12, personally assumes the "yoke of the law".²⁸ Confirmation, similarly, provides Christian youth with the opportunity to take a personal stand for Christ – to confess, personally, and publicly the faith of Christ crucified that parents and godparents confessed on their behalf during their baptism as an infant or young child.

²³ , Michael Green, Baptism: Its Purpose., Practice and Power. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1987) 63

²⁴ Ibid, 63.

²⁵ Ibid, 66

²⁶ Ibid, 67.

²⁷ Ibid, 102.

²⁸ Ibid.

Confirmation is a sacrament of initiation that marks the beginning of a journey toward a deeper knowledge of God. First and foremost, it is a public profession of faith, a “confession” of belief. Such public confession of faith is an integral part of Christian belonging. Confirmation is the way our Church has traditionally made provision for this.²⁹ It actually consists of 2 confirmations not one: The candidate confirms his or her Christian profession; and the Lord, through the medium of the Bishop, confirms his protection and strength for the battle ahead.³⁰

Secondly, Confirmation is a domestic rite bringing the candidate into full accreditation and recognition within a particular branch of the church. Whereas baptism is not denominationally oriented – one is baptized into Christ - Confirmation brings one into full communicating and voting standing in a denomination.³¹

Thirdly, Confirmation is a commissioning for service. It is NOT a passing out parade. Indeed, the liturgy contains a prayer that the candidate may continue Christ’s forever and daily increase in his Holy Spirit.³²

These purposes are laudable. Indeed, they would seem to be essential to the ongoing health of a Christian community; whether they are to be fulfilled through Confirmation, or through some other process, like the Catechumenate. For the churches that have a tradition of Confirmation, it would appear to be more effective to strengthen what is already a part of their fabric, than to attempt to develop something entirely different.

As to the appropriate age for Confirmation or Catechumenate, – teen or adult - Andy Hickford, in *Essential Youth*, has noted that young people are the single largest group of non-Christians regularly attending

²⁹ Ibid, 111.

³⁰ Ibid, 105.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Green, 105.

Church.³³ Later he notes that statistically most Christians are converted in their teenage years.³⁴ Ministering to a group with the highest potential of conversion would appear to be just plain common sense.

If we can accept the continued need for Confirmation, and that it is appropriate to administer the rite in the teenage years – as Jews do with Bar Mitzvah – what remains is to examine the program currently being used, and evaluate it in the light of what is known about youth and its trials and tribulations.

Paul Borthwick quotes Ernest Becker, who said “Youth is not made for pleasure but for heroism”. He goes on to say, to understand youth, respond to their needs and involve them in being heroes.³⁵ “Teenagers”, he said, “must be challenged by the Great Commission of Jesus Christ – challenged to dedicate themselves to the fulfillment of Christ’s mission on earth ...they must be given the chance to help solve the problems of repression, ignorance, and superstition that they might help the downtrodden to find opportunity to find life, fulfillment and redemption in Christ.”³⁶ The educators from the Association of Church Missions Committee appear to agree when they said, “Youth are looking for a life to emulate. Youth leaders, teachers, parents, pastors, Christian nationals and missionaries need to present integrated, authentic, consistent lives as world Christians for youth to emulate.”³⁷ In Paul Borthwick’s words, “As Jesus said to his disciples, and as Paul said to his, we need to say to the young people of our ministries, “Follow me”. Nothing motivates students more than a real model.”³⁸ In other words, we need to make them disciples.

³³ Andy Hickford, Essential Youth, (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1998), 112.

³⁴ *ibid*, 196.

³⁵ *ibid*, 33.

³⁶ Hickford, 42

³⁷ Paul Borthwick, Youth and Missions, (Waynesboro: OM Literature, 2000 ed.), 53

³⁸ *ibid*, 54

A formation program for Discipleship is the appropriate function of Confirmation. It has the possibility of being the most efficacious among teenagers, who are at the most idealistic stage of human development, and susceptible to a call for self-sacrifice and heroic effort. They are thirsting for meaning in their lives.

Baptism is and should be the sign of membership in the Body of Christ. Confirmation should be the mark of a disciple, one commissioned into the priesthood of all believers to spread the Good News. I disagree, therefore with The Rev. Canon Hill's proposal. There is much in it that is good, and much that will be useful in re-engineering confirmation. However, I believe the basic premise of believer's baptism to be flawed, and not in keeping with either the tradition of the Church, or the contemporary need to disciple youth. I suggest that young, and not so young adults should not be our principal focus; but rather, teenagers; in whose dreams and visions the hope of the church has always rested. For adults, a catechumenical process such as Hill has described, would be an appropriate vehicle for confirmation preparation . It is, after all, built around an adult learning model.

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