

## ***BAPTISM & CONFIRMATION: CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE***

In contemporary practice, Baptism may be administered to people at one of two stages in their lives. PaedoBaptism (infant Baptism) is administered to children, often infants, with sponsors who make promises on behalf of the child. PaedoBaptism operates with a communitarian understanding of faith in which the faith of the sponsors and the church carry the child until s/he is able to make equivalent promises in his/her own right. Adult Baptism, which as the name suggests, takes place at a stage when the child is considered an adult, takes a more individualistic view: the baptisand is viewed as able to make promises straightaway in his or her own right. Adult Baptism, since the days of the early church has often been preceded by a period of instruction commonly known as the catechumenate. Other factors influence contemporary thinking about Baptism: it is viewed by some theologians as a rite of initiation.

In the Anglican church, there is a strong practice of paedoBaptism followed by Confirmation. What is equally strong is the number of the newly confirmed who do not maintain regular practising membership of a faith community. In Anglican terminology, they might “adhere” which really means they don’t!

Several factors have made me reflect on our practice and how it fits with both the practice of the early church, and more modern thinkers. In particular, attention needs to focus on the purpose of Baptism and how it functions in relation to faith. In the case of both adult Baptism and Confirmation, we tend to take an intellectual view of the sacraments, and tend to prepare people for them by the catechumenate or Confirmation classes and courses. Even courses like Alpha and Emmaus assume that they are in the business of imparting knowledge to inquirers. We can see a pattern of intellectualising faith, and an attendant focus on “believing that”, where an emphasis is placed on the subject matter of that kind of belief.

Please note that I purposefully call this an “intellectualising” tradition. It is tempting to try and load the bases of the suggestions that follow by describing such patterns as “Gnostic or neo-Gnostic”, those being emotive

terms which can be used to sway an argument, but strictly speaking they are not. Gnosticism suggests the imparting of esoteric or arcane knowledge, not the more readily available substance of Christian dogma. It would be as accurate as to equate Paul's "mystery of Christ" with the Mysteries of the ancient world- an enterprise which has often been attempted and always rides roughshod over the major and subtle differences between the two.

So, where will this exploration go? It will start with an exploration of some of the NT accounts of Baptism, particularly in Acts, and the place occupied by Baptism in people's faith journey. Jumping to the modern period, it will then consider the implications of these insights for the modern world, with a particular focus on the work of Roland Allen and the ways in which his proposed practice departs from the established norms of his time (which in many ways still remain normative in our own). An attempt to justify the proposals in practice which emerge will then be defended by, in particular, examining the relationship between faith, morality and Baptism. Perhaps, the best argument that can be made for even advancing this progression is simply the fact that the established practice does not work, that our intellectualized approach, does not adequately address the task of making disciples, and even, may make the preparation for the sacraments into an equivalent of a scholastic experience. If this is so, the reception of the sacraments becomes the equivalent of a graduation. We all know what happens to graduates: they leave and go onto other things, because graduation marks the end of an experience, not a beginning.

### **The NT and Baptism**

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, the Great Commission contains and injunction to "Go and make disciple of all the nations, baptising and teaching them.....". The ordering of the actions here, where the two participle form supplementary imperatives, and thus a definite ordering of events, is markedly different from our normal practice, for we tend to teach and then baptise: particularly in the case of adults, but often as well, in the case of sponsors of children for Baptism.

If we go into Acts, we see signs of a pattern which seems markedly different to our own. The Ethiopian eunuch is baptised, presumable, after the space of a few hours, given that the account does not tell us of Philip teaching him for several days. Further on in Acts, the pattern of Baptism with, to our eyes, remarkably little preparation is seen the case of Paul himself (9:18), gentiles (10:44-8), Lydia (16:15), the jailer (16:33), followers of John (19:1-5). It may be argued that these passages may telescope long periods of instruction into a few short notes, but they do not read that way. The impression builds that the early church baptised people remarkably swiftly. This may not always have been a good thing: the beginning of 1 Cor shows that some of those baptised have manifestly failed to understand what Baptism involves, viewing it primarily as a commitment to the baptiser, to the extent that Christ appears as one of many. Nonetheless, it appears to have been their practice. Even if not perfect.

#### **“Skip a Bit, Brother....”**

Catechetics became remarkably different in the following centuries. A pattern emerged in which a long period of preparation appears to have been introduced and which culminated in reception of the rites we know as Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist at Easter. We must, however, note that such practice may have been aspirational as some of the texts (like Hippolytus) may be models of ideal, hoped-for practice rather than an accurate record of what went on (we might cite 1 Cor 11- Paul's hopes for the Corinthian Eucharist as opposed to their actual practice as a similar example of the phenomenon). Note, too, that this pattern compromises one or other of the sacraments: it gives the impression that either Baptism is incomplete (and needs something to be added by Confirmation) or that Confirmation is redundant (since Baptism is complete initiation into the church).

However, church history also reveals the development of paedobaptism in which the relationship between catechetics and sacrament follow a different pattern. Baptism is followed by catechetics, leading to Confirmation. This pattern does, however, show that, in practice, we are already in part

committed to the pattern of the great Commandment (Matthew 28) to baptise and teach....

### **Recent Thinking**

There are two main influences on the reflection in this section: Roland Allen and Stephen Cotterell (the first from his extant writings, the second from reflections offered to our recent Diocesan Leaders Study session in May 2009).

Allen is often quoted and his ideas are often misappropriated. However, his thoughts on Baptism in his *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?* (92-107). His thought on Baptism are clear: it should be administered sooner rather than later and he emphasises that the local elders should check on the morality of the person involved rather than their intellectual grasp on faith. The implication is clear: candidates need to be made aware of the moral and lifestyle implications of asking for and receiving Baptism. They do not need to be taught in advance. Is this not risky? Yes, he admits, but the church at Corinth survived on such a strategy, even if it was a fractured and damaged institution. Perhaps acknowledgement of our broken-ness is less problematic for spiritual well-being than pride.

The second influence comes from Stephen Cotterell's summary of reflections on the catechumenate which has moved from the classic pattern on "hear, repent, join" to "contact, journey". In this new pattern, it makes sense to baptise early, and then journey together in faith. A strong factor in favour of drawing this conclusion is what I will call "Bunnings or DIY Theology".

### **"Bunnings or DIY Theology"**

This is nothing new to the church: the Church Fathers knew and addressed, in particular, the theology of Pelagius which held out the idea that people could forge their own salvation either in whole (Pelagianism) or in part (Semi-Pelagianism). Christ as redeemer is either redundant or only a part contributor to the process of salvation.

Patterns of Baptism which delay Baptism risk compromising the idea of Christ as Redeemer too. They may do this morally or intellectually. When someone

is “fit for Baptism” meaning that they have already attained a pre-required level of moral behaviour or an intellectual understanding of faith this effectively means that the work put in to attaining such levels is effectively saving work. It may be argued that this is not so, that “prevenient grace” to use the old phrase, has been at work. Fine, that may well be the case. But the impression given is that a person, by their efforts, attains a level of behaviour or “knowledge” which makes them acceptable BEFORE receiving the promises of God. Surely it is better to operate with a system which makes a clear and unequivocal statement that God in Christ, shown in Baptism, is the one who initiates and sustains the whole process, and to express this ritually by early Baptism. This also makes paedobaptism and adult Baptism conform to a pattern in which a period of learning and growth towards Christian maturity is marked at key stages by the sacraments of Baptism (at the beginning) and Confirmation (a degree of response and maturity). Note that I purposefully do not say at the beginning and the end. Our practice of Confirmation has suffered greatly from being presented as a kind of spiritual graduation. We all know what happens at graduation: people leave the institution and don’t come back, except for the odd significant re-union.

To objections that such a schema diminishes the sacraments, I would offer the following responses.

- If we, for example, “ring-fence” Baptism, to keep it from being given to the wrong people- what are we actually saying? Are we having the temerity to say that WE are protecting God and his things from abuse- that surely would be the utmost arrogance. It also begs the question: what kind of God might actually need or benefit from our protection? I’m tempted to answer: only a very small one. We might even ask similar questions about our Eucharistic practice.
- This generosity, or risk taking, has, I would also venture, a strong NT basis expressed in the concepts that Jesus comes for sinners and the sick, not for those who are capable of living fully in accord with the will of God by their own efforts.
- It also connects with the soteriology described by Klaus Nürnberger. Which demands acceptance and welcome take the place of pre-

conditions for acceptance. In his pattern, all, irrespective of personal merit, are welcomed by God, but that welcome, will, in turn, demand a response, a conversion, towards a new way of living. Sacraments are not magical, not a “get out of jail” card- this much is clear from 1 Cor and its rejection of such thinking in Graeco-Roman religious tradition, and its affirmation of the Judaic pattern of sacramentalism with its demand of ethics and response.

### **Baptism & Faith**

This pattern of ritual also has implications for our concept of faith. As is well-known, the biblical concept of faith includes two elements: trust (essentially a relational aspect) and “knowing that” (an intellectual aspect). At times the intellectual aspect has come to predominate- and certainly it was the intellectual substance of faith which has lain behind many of the violent controversies which have blighted the church’s history. It has also, as I suggested earlier, contributed (but not solely) to “Gnosticising” traditions. When baptism is put before teaching, the relational aspect of faith, exemplified in Jesus’ blessing of the children (Mark 10:13-16 and parallels) comes to the fore. Note, too, the significance that this passage has occupied as a justification for the baptism of children in subsequent church life. So what happens is that a theology of the sacraments of initiation is developed in which the emphasis is placed on the baptised being in a trusting relationship with God, rather than an intellectual basis. This does not and should not omit the intellectual, as appropriate to the abilities of the baptised, but it does prevent it from dominating, and even making intellectual ability or understanding of a certain level a prerequisite. This promotes a more inclusive theology of the sacraments and faith which offers room for those who are mentally challenged, and might otherwise be excluded, as well as believers (trusters) of every age. It also offers us the potential to explore “growing in faith” as deepening a relationship and deepening trust, and offers a paradigm of faith in which we grow away from trust, and in which mechanisms need to be developed to hold levels of trust rather than simply add layers of understanding: the two tasks are quite different.

This programme also asks us to examine how we relate to others. We live in modern or post-modern age with sensibilities' which have been shaped by a hermeneutics of suspicion, since the Enlightenment, but cranked up by the "masters of suspicion" (Marx, Freud et al) and the deconstructionist of more recent theory. These make us suspicious of an enterprise like that outlined: we may be suspicious of those who come to us, and tempted to think the worst. That may well be our analytical default setting: trust no-one. *Quid quid id est, timeo Danaos et dona ferentes* (Vergil- "I fear the greeks especially when they bear gifts.). We would all like to think we are as wise as Laocoon, the one Trojan who didn't think accepting the wooden horse was a good idea). But to hanker for that kind of insight is not the only possibility. There is also a hermeneutics of trust, seen in thinkers like Wittgenstein and Gadamer, which encourages us to take a more positive view of traditions and people. And we really need to stop smugly describing ourselves as post-modern if we are truly of the Gospel for the two are poles apart. I am much taken by the following words of John Thomson:

"Pastoral practice as well as intellectual wrestling led me to believe that pluralism as an ideology, like post-modernism, its philosophical expression, is not only self-contradictory (that is, it makes a claim to totality in the very same breath as asserting that difference is the character of reality), but also crushes the most profound of intuitions which ordinary people hold dear. It represents the very pretension to power it rhetorically seeks to subvert since only the security and privileges of the university could spawn such an acidic critique whose consequences actually undermine the possibility of the university, let alone society, as a conversational community. It represents a demeaning of those without the intellectual tools to resist. It renders the poor even more vulnerable than when there was some agreement about norms to which they might either aspire or at least resort to when abused. It represents atheism in its most destructive form. It is the ideology of the intellectual aristocracy."

In the church, which should have no aristocracy of any kind, we need to avoid spiritual and intellectual claims of superiority which actually diminish and turn away those for whom God became man.

## The Practicalities

1. Enquirers be made aware of Baptism, the expectation of response and be baptised as soon as practicable.
2. a catechumentate of companionship
3. Confirmation as an indication of response and Christian maturity

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## Further Reading

Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?*

Klaus Nürnberger, *The Living God and the Living Dead*

Thomson, John B., *Church on Edge*.