

## **CHRISTIAN INITIATION (1987)**

### **A. CHRISTIAN INITIATION**

The Plymouth Conference of 1982 requested 'a thorough examination at a fundamental level of the whole theology and practice of Christian initiation in the Methodist Church'. The immediate cause of this resolution was the fact that there have been a few of our ministers who feel unable in conscience to baptise infants and that our present, and indeed historic and often affirmed, rules require that they cease to serve. But there are other issues. The world wide movement of renewal, which will be described in more detail below, has meant that many who have entered, sometimes charismatically, into the experience of liberation in Christ wish to leave the past behind and to seal this by the Gospel Sacrament of Baptism. If they have already been baptised as infants, they feel that this was probably a social custom, meaningless to them who were without conscious awareness of it. They clamour, not so much for second baptism. as for 'the real thing' and various provisions for the renewal of vows they never made, for example in Confirmation or the Methodist Covenant Service, or in each Eucharist, seem a travesty. The water, the Scriptural sign, is essential. Some indeed are almost resentful of having been baptised as infants. They feel cheated. There is some feeling that infant baptism and believers' baptism are different ordinances and should be recognised as such. There are also demands for a Service of Infant Dedication or Thanksgiving, as an alternative to Baptism.

All this has revived a long-standing disquiet, voiced for more than thirty years, and shared by many who are convinced paedobaptists. Is not indiscriminate baptism impossible to justify? Must not the sacrament be confined to the children of those parents who take the promises seriously and are themselves visibly in Christ?

Needless to say none of these grave matters is a problem peculiar to the Methodist Church. Opposition to indiscriminate baptism was loud in the Anglican 'Parish and People Movement' in the 1950s, while all the Churches which are heirs of Western Christendom are faced with the clamours, indeed the 'heart-cries', of the 'renewed'.

### **Scope of the Report**

We have looked again at the New Testament, though we have focused on the teaching which bears most closely on the issues outlined. In this way the various emphases within the NT are clearly acknowledged without cloaking disagreement on various points of exegesis or being side-tracked into less relevant matters of speculation or dispute. We then survey the evidence from Christian experience throughout Church history, with an obviously important section on Methodism, but also giving considerable space to the early Fathers, into whose doctrine the NT itself merges, and who may have in the past been neglected in Protestant evangelical discussions, though they were important to Wesley and the Reformers before him. Their problems were not identical with ours; yet they were fighting in the different conditions of their time against some of the same distortions of the Christian faith, e.g. the Gnostic divorce between the activity of God in creation and

salvation. We notice the responses of other communions to the problems which are now almost universal.

We are, however, in search of a 'breakthrough'.

Perhaps the major problem which has made this report necessary is that most recent treatments of baptism written from within particular denominations tend to drive the exposition and argument to an either/or – in bald terms, the either/or of grace or faith. **Either** baptism has to be seen as itself a paradigm and expression of God's prevenient grace reaching out to us before we are even aware of it. **Or** baptism is an expression of or witness to the faith whereby the individual responds to that grace. Posed thus, most treatments of baptism contend either for infant baptism or believers' baptism as mutually exclusive interpretations – mutually exclusive in that a believers' baptist will not recognise infant baptism as valid, and a paedobaptist will refuse to allow one baptised in infancy to discount that baptism and undergo baptism (again) as a believer. This problem emerges out of different emphases put on the relation between baptism and the gospel – the one seeing baptism as essentially **an expression of** the gospel, the other seeing baptism as essentially **response to** the gospel. Can a way be found out of the impasse by reminding ourselves of the character of the gospel, without involving ourselves in further unresolved argument?

Secondly, there is the question whether there may not be social and psychological insights both in the past and of our time, which, without offering another any false gospel, may revive the authentic traditions of Catholic and evangelical Christianity in a unity of redeemed nature and grace, which manifestly speaks to our one world? Has the Church used rites and symbols adequately? The waters of baptism are half-frozen in formality and trickle into the token gestures of people half-afraid of the power of signs. Thus we fail both the natural man and those Christians who claim to have received an especial gift of grace. There is also the need to look beyond rites to the life into which we are initiated. What does it mean to have been baptised?

### **Some Important Preliminaries**

#### **1. Glossary of terms**

##### **a) Sacrament**

This is not properly a NT word, though **Sacramentum** was the most frequent Latin translation of the NT Greek **Mysterion**, which means mystery or secret. The latter usually refers to the hidden things of God which are disclosed in Jesus Christ (Eg. Mark 4:11 and parallels, Eph.5.32). 'It speaks of revelation not ritual' (Alasdair Heron, **Table and Tradition**, Handsel Press 1983 p.55). Nevertheless, no religion can survive without rites and ceremonies which embody and continue its traditions, bring together its adherents and unite them in a common action, and point beyond themselves to the reality which is believed to be at the heart of faith and practice. Thus the sacramental idea and sacramental theology are as legitimate for Christian believers as they are inevitable. And 'a good case can still be made out for at least an indirect dominical institution' of Baptism and the Eucharist (Donald Baillie, **The Theology of the Sacraments**, Faber and Faber, 1964 edn. p.42). But there is need to be careful not to impose later meanings on the NT. For us a Sacrament discloses and proclaims what God has done for the world in Christ and **conveys** (to use a term

Wesley took over from the Caroline divines) its benefits to the believing community.

#### b) **Baptism**

This means literally dipping or submergence and it has from the beginnings of Christianity been the ceremony of initiation into the Church, though art and architecture as well as the climate of Palestine suggest that it was not always done by total immersion. Jewish proselytes were baptised as well as circumcised at least from the beginning of the Second Century: the Qumran sect practised ritual washing. John 'the Baptist' was given his nickname because he baptised. But the idea of baptism was taken up and enriched by association with the Holy Spirit and the death of Christ, and used in this enriched sense particularly by Paul. And the rite attracted to itself other rites which were added to initiation by water. In the story of the baptism of Jesus, the Spirit descended and the voice from heaven proclaimed him God's Son, or Messiah, the Lord's anointed, as he emerged from the Jordan. In Acts 8 the Holy Spirit was not given to the baptised Samaritans until the apostles from Jerusalem had laid on hands. Quite soon, therefore, oil was used in initiation and also some form of the laying on of hands, or in the earliest rites, 'hand', from which Confirmation evolved. The term 'Baptism' sometimes refers to the ceremony with water, sometimes to a complex of Initiation rites, though in the last quarter of the Fourth Century, the Church Order, known as the **Apostolic Constitutions** states clearly: 'But if there be neither oil nor chrism, the water is sufficient both for the anointing and the seal and for the confession of him that is dead, or indeed is dying together with (Christ)'. We ourselves regard Baptism with water as the Sacrament of Initiation into the life of Christ, and his people. Additional rites are in some circumstances called for to make possible a personal confession of faith, or in some sense to 'renew baptism'; but they are adjuncts and subsidiary. 'The Water is sufficient'.

#### c) **Membership**

This originated in the Pauline doctrine of the church as the Body of Christ with its various members, i.e. limbs or organs. Paul seems this way to identify Christ and the Church; in the words of a Wesley hymn on the Lord's Supper 'Christ and his Church are one' (**Hymns and Psalms** 622). Cf. the language of John 15 about Vine and Branches. Membership therefore means incorporation into Christ. Is this the same as belonging to the local, visible Church, which may seem little different from a respectable and religious club? Are there those 'paid-up' in the Church who are not members of Christ? Our claim is that all the baptised are 'in Christ' and although the membership may not realise its potential, or indeed be damaged, even to some being cut off from the source of life in him, to be baptised is as solemn and glorious as the NT metaphors of union would imply.

## 2. **Scripture and Tradition**

The traditional theology of Christian baptism has never attempted a complete justification from Scripture alone. This is in fact true of all Christian theology and is inevitable since even if all subsequent developments were ignored, a future generation cannot interpret Scripture as though its members lived in the first century, and those who have tried to take their stand on Scripture alone have often been most conditioned by their own time and would have bewildered the writers of the NT. Tradition is not necessarily the letter of a dead legalism; it may be the

handing on of a continuing and ever-developing experience, the fulfilment of the promise of fuller understanding and greater works. It needs to be tested by the record of the original revelation ever pondered and interpreted by new knowledge, by the common mind of believers, and by the insights and discoveries of the love of God in Christ active in each new age. Tradition has content (1 Cor. 15:3ff); but it also includes experience, perhaps a 'more living' term. This is also 'handed on' and needs to be tested by the means described.

John Wesley's **Notes on the New Testament**, one of our Church's doctrinal standards, offers us a model approach to Scripture as a source of doctrine. In particular, the **Notes** establish these principles among us:

- to use the best available scholarship (textual, historical, exegetical);
- to use the scholarship available from any source without confessional prejudice;
- to open our interpretation to the judgement of the whole Christian world for its counsel;
- to follow the movement of Scripture from one proposition or vantage-point to the next, for in that movement and progression itself is an essential element of divine revelation.

This last principle enables us to make positive use of the results of the most searching critical examinations of recent times. Where diversity and development are shown up by such research, these factors may have for us a theological importance of their own: it is the **direction** in which God leads his people (the Scripture authors and editors among them) which concerns us, just as much as the particular insights vouchsafed as distinct moments in the process.

## **Baptism in the New Testament**

### **1. The gospel and baptism**

There would be no dispute on two aspects of the gospel presented in the NT.

- a) **The gospel as offer of forgiveness/acceptance.** So Jesus characterised his own ministry, eg. in Mark 2:17 and Luke 7:36-50. It was precisely the sinners, those discounted by the righteous within Israel whom Jesus welcomed. Similarly Paul's message of justification was the offer of God's acceptance to the Gentiles, equally discounted by the righteous as standing outside the covenant people (eg. Rom. 4:9-11).
- b) **The gospel as offer of repentance/faith.** Again we find common ground between Jesus and Paul, as such passages as Mark 1:15 and Rom. 1:16-17 make clear.

Both aspects of course are well known and given place in the either-or of paedobaptism or believers' baptism: the paedobaptists usually emphasising the faith of parents, sponsors and believing community; believers' baptists usually emphasising the God-giveness of faith, faith as response to the prior grace of God. But a third aspect of the gospel prominent in the NT is often neglected.

- c) **The openness of the gospel offer as itself a criticism of those who would restrict the grace of God.** Jesus proclaimed his gospel precisely in opposition to those who restricted God's grace to the righteous and denied it to the sinner, and who restricted it precisely by reference to the law and by their ritual practice

(Mark 2:23-5; 7:1-23; Luke 13:10-17). Paul similarly maintained his gospel precisely in opposition to those who wanted to restrict God's grace to the chosen race and to deny it to the Gentile as such, and who did so precisely by making the ritual act of circumcision the make or break issue (Gal. 2-5).

There is clearly a warning here that the openness of the gospel's offer can become too restricted by ritual requirements or practices.

d) **The gospel as an invitation to join the community of the new age.**

While the call comes to individuals, the corporate dimension is implicit throughout the New Testament: the body of Christ is the obvious Pauline expression of this, (1 Cor. 12), but even the apparently individualistic Johannine Gospel has the vine and its branches (John 15:1-10). Furthermore, baptism is not something one does oneself, but something done to one by others, and by which one is incorporated into the community.

e) **The gospel confirms the covenant with Israel, and extends its prerogatives to all concerned.** 'God's gifts and call are irrevocable' (Rom. 11:29) is the conclusion of Paul's discussion of the relationship between the gospel of Jesus and God's existing commitment to Israel. The earliest preaching of baptism to Jews, described in Acts 2 (particularly v.39), extends God's covenant with succeeding generations of his people to the Gentiles. The subsequent necessity, during the early generations of the predominantly Gentile mission of the Church, of emphasising the strangeness of the Gospel to those of pagan parentage does not invalidate the principle that the children born in the community of faith have their place in the covenant.

2. **The baptismal texts**

There are quite a number of texts where a reference to baptism as such is disputed, particularly in Paul – the washing language of 1 Cor. 6:11, Eph. 5:26 and Tit. 3:5 (a spiritual or physical cleansing or both? – cf. Acts 15:9, Heb. 9:14; 10:22; 1 John 1:7,9), and the seal of the Spirit talk in 2 Cor. 1:22, and Eph. 1:13, 4:30 (where it is more likely the vividness of his converts' experience of the Spirit which is in view – cf. Gal. 3:2-5; 4:6-7 Phil. 3:3). But there are sufficient passages where baptismal language is used in one way or another for us to proceed.

a) **Passages where the divine initiative comes to the fore:** particularly the use of the 'divine passive' (to denote an action accomplished by God) in Rom. 6:3-4, Gal. 3:27 and Col. 2:12, possibly also John 3:5; and the possibility of arguing that God was thought to mediate his forgiveness through baptism in Acts 2:38 and 22:16. Also to be mentioned here is the more involved argument for the solidarity of the household of faith, so that those given by birth to members of the covenant people are to be counted as members of that people. Reference is usually made to Acts 2:39 and 1 Cor. 7:14. That baptism is the inevitable corollary can be argued from the parallel with circumcision in the old covenant (though see (d) below), and from the household baptisms in Acts 16:15, 33, 18:8 and 1 Cor. . 1:16 (though it is equally likely that 'household' denotes retainers and slaves without implying the presence of children). There is insufficient evidence for the view that already within the first century spiritual birth was identified with baptism, particularly where it is the creative power of the word which is being given prominence (cf. Jas. 1:18; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23; 1 John 3:9).

b) **Passages where the repentance/faith of the baptisand is to the fore.**

John's baptism was characterised as a baptism of repentance (Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3; Acts 13.24; 19.4). A similar emphasis is clear in Acts 2.38,41. 8.12-13, 16.14-15, 33-4, 18.8 and 19.2-3. The language of being baptised 'into the name of Christ' (Acts 8.16; 19.5) is probably drawn from the commercial world, where 'into the name of' was used in transaction: to be baptised in the name of someone was to be made over to him, to become his disciple (1 Cor. 1.12-13). And the nearest thing to a definition of baptism in the NT defines it as an 'appeal to God for a clear conscience' or 'pledge to God of a clear conscience' or 'a demand in the name of God for a good orientation of the will' (1 Pet. 3.21). At the same time, the fact that these references all appear in contexts in which the gospel is being preached to non-Christians in a pre-Christian culture, at least raises the question whether they would be equally applicable where Christianity has been the 'established' religion.

In short, in neither case is the NT evidence so clear cut as to require the expositor to make an either-or choice between paedobaptism and believers' baptism.

c) Less easy to dispute is **the consistent emphasis on the once-for-allness of Christian baptism**. It was precisely the once-for-allness of John's baptism which distinguished it from the regular ablutions of ritual purification particularly as practised in the Qumran community. John also gave the rite profound eschatological significance – baptism as a way of preparing for or escaping from the wrath to come (Matt. 3.7); as symbolising and preparing for the decisive acts of final judgement by the Coming One (Matt. 3.10-12). This finally decisive character of entering upon discipleship of Jesus, of transfer to Christ's Lordship, is emphasised in the 'already' emphasis of such passages as John 5.24 and Col. 1.13, and linked with baptism particularly in the death and burial imagery of Rom. 6.3-4 and Col. 2.12, and probably the birth from above imagery of John 3.5. And though the same imagery can be used both for the decisive beginnings of the Christian life and for its ongoing discipline of renewal (cf. Gal. 3.27 and Rom. 13.14; Rom 6.5 with Phil. 3.10), there is no suggestion that repeated baptism was ever thought of as an option for Christians (note Eph. 4.5). There is a once-for-allness about entry into the new age, into the new covenant, which Heb. 6.4-6 in particular is concerned to safeguard, and which the once-for-allness of baptism was seen to express.

In fact, the lack of a NT precedent for a repetition of baptism in the name of Christ is a striking feature of the NT witness. The twelve 'disciples' of Acts 19.1-7 had previously known only John's baptism, and were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus presumably because they had not received the Spirit; whereas Apollos in Acts 18.24-28, who likewise knew only John's baptism, was apparently not 're-baptised', presumably because he was already 'aglow with the Spirit' (18.25; cf. the disciples at Pentecost who had previously received only John's baptism). Most striking of all is the case of the Samaritans (Acts 8). Like the twelve at Ephesus (Acts 19) they had not received the Spirit. But they were **not** re-baptised by Peter and John. The difference must be that the baptism they had received was 'in the name of Jesus' (8.16). Despite the fact that their previous initiation had not been effective so far as the gift of the Spirit was concerned, they were not re-baptised.

At the same time, bound up with the whole complex is a warning, sometimes explicit, sometimes implicit, **not to put too much weight on the ritual moment** in the whole process. John the Baptist used the imagery of baptism to express the Coming One's work – 'he will baptise in Holy Spirit and fire' (Matt. 3.11) – where it is clear that something other than John's baptism in water is in view (cf. Isa. 30.27-28; Mark 10.38). The accounts of what happened to Jesus in his encounter with John at the Jordan are consistent in passing quickly over the actual baptism to focus attention primarily on Jesus' anointing with the Spirit (particularly Luke 3.21-22; John 1.32-34; cf. Acts 10.37-38). Jesus himself did not practice baptism; or even more significant, if he did so initially he soon abandoned the practice (John 3.22; 4.1-2). Acts 1.5 and 11.16 repeat the Baptist's contrast between his baptising in water and Christians' experience of being baptised in the Spirit; and a related disjunction between baptism and the gift of the Spirit is attested in Acts 8.12-17 and 10.44-48, where it is the gift of the Spirit on which the issue of discipleship and salvation really hangs (8.16; 11.4-18; 19.2). Similarly the single reference John 3.5 has to be set alongside the stronger emphasis on birth as from the Spirit (3.5-8), on the Spirit as Life-giver (6.63) as symbolised by a river of living water (4.10,14; 7.38-39).

To the same effect is Paul's argument against the necessity of circumcision, despite the explicit warnings of Gen. 17.9-14. What mattered was the circumcision 'made without hands' (Col. 2:11), the circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2.28-29) which the gift of the Spirit effected (Phil. 3.3). It was the presence of the Spirit which defined the Christian (Rom.8.9). Reception of the Spirit rendered circumcision unnecessary (Gal. 3.3). For Paul the Spirit had replaced circumcision as the hallmark of the covenant people (2 Cor. 3.3,6), the Spirit's manifest activity in a life serving as sign and seal of the new covenant in the way that circumcision had served for the old (Jer. 31.31.-34; 2 Cor. 1.22; cf. Rom. 4.11). With such an emphasis, Paul's relative depreciation of baptism in 1 Cor. 1.17, following upon his congratulation of the Corinthians' spiritual endowment in 1.4-7, should not occasion any surprise. And the likelihood increases that in 1 Cor. 12.13 he had in mind the outpouring of the Spirit on the Corinthians without necessarily implying that that outpouring was tied to the ritual act of baptism, (though most commentators assume that Paul is speaking of baptism as such).

It should also be borne in mind that Baptism occurs as one of a series of experiences and events through which believers go and that in the NT the place of Baptism in relation to other experiences and events varied from one to the other. It bore a different relationship to event and experience, for the disciples of Jesus (one assumes they **were** baptised); for those baptised on the day of Pentecost; and then for those referred to in Acts 19. The degree of the appreciation of the meaning of baptism varies from person to person and experience to experience according to the context in which it takes place.

The significance of Jesus' acceptance and blessing of children is not entirely clear for the present purposes, though an established part of our baptismal liturgy (Mark 10.13-16). The episode certainly indicates Jesus' readiness to receive and bless little children; but that is not disputed by any Christian. What remains unclear is whether baptism is the equivalent today (bearing in mind that Jesus himself did not baptise). Jesus blesses children brought to him whether they are baptised or not, and, indeed, says 'of such are the Kingdom of God'.

Christian parents seeking such a blessing should therefore not be discouraged either by the Church's denying their children baptism if that is what the parents wish, or by insisting that the blessing must be tied to baptism even if the parents do not wish it.

### 3. Conclusions

- a) The NT evidence is not sufficiently clear to resolve the question of whether paedobaptism or believers' baptism is the more appropriate expression of and response to the gospel. On the other hand a baptismal practice which does not hold grace and faith in sufficient balance, such as 'indiscriminate baptism', is much less easy to justify from the NT precisely for that reason.
- b) The NT gives no encouragement to the idea that baptism in the name of Christ is repeatable. On the contrary, the once-for-allness of its symbolism of death and birth is a prominent feature of the NT teaching and precedent for a second Christian baptism is lacking, even for a case where the reality of the Spirit came significantly later than the ritual act of baptism. Indeed Christian baptism was only given to those who had already received John's baptism when the Spirit had **not** been received: the gift of the Spirit so fulfilled the expectation even of a less than Christian baptism that proper Christian baptism was evidently considered unnecessary. For those who regard the NT as providing their rule of faith and life this must be a weighty consideration.
- c) The danger of making too much of the ritual moment does not provide a decisive argument in determining the either-or of paedobaptism or believers' baptism. It could be developed as an argument against paedobaptism. But it could equally be developed as an argument against any insistence that baptism must provide expression for faith newly awakened. Its force is rather to warn against pushing the choice between paedobaptism and believers' baptism to an either-or. It is the insistence that only one of these teachings is right and the other wrong which offends against the openness of Jesus and the NT's qualification of the ritual moment, rather than the teachings themselves. It is not paedobaptism which is excluded so much as the attitude which refuses to countenance paedobaptism. It is not so much that believers' baptism is commended as the vitality of faith and the Spirit's activity in a life, without tying those necessarily to the ritual moment.

### Evidence from Christian Experience

#### 1. The Fathers and After

##### a) Theological Understanding of Baptism

Theodore of Mopsuestia (d.428) speaks of the Sacraments as 'awe-inspiring mysteries'. It is quite clear that for Theodore the future world is anticipated in the present. Baptism symbolises the transfer from one order or condition to another. Both baptism and eucharist perform sacramentally the events that took place in connection with Christ, in the belief that what happened to him will happen to us. Passion and resurrection are re-enacted so that the believer can participate in the action: 'we believe that through these symbols, as through unspeakable signs, we possess sometime before hand the realities themselves.' As the newborn baby is weak, so the newly baptised possesses only potentially

the faculties of his immortal nature, but that possession is the ground of his future hope and of his present actions; for he should endeavour to live in a manner worthy of his heavenly citizenship.

There are ways in which Theodore is not entirely typical of the Patristic material. He was so profoundly conscious of the radical difference between old covenant and new that his scriptural exegesis was felt to be shocking in its rejection of the Christological understanding of the Old Testament. His tendency to contrast 'Man-in-Adam' and 'Man-in-Christ' led to certain Christological emphases which were later judged to be Nestorian. Yet his clear grasp of eschatological perspectives, though sharper than is generally found, illuminates the Patristic attitude to baptism as a radical transfer from one realm or allegiance to another. A striking feature of the Catechetical Homilies of John Chrysostom which have become available in this century is the vivid sense that the baptised are transferring from one side to another in a real conflict between God and the devil. They are now soldiers of Christ; faith is a contract made with God through the Spirit. The newly enlisted must expect ambush and attack from the enemy; he must be alert and renounce his old ways. Baptism is not simply a washing away of sin, but a melting down and re-moulding, or a bath or re-birth. Thus the sense of 'new creation in Christ' was never entirely lost as New Testament 'realised eschatology' waned and New Testament perceptions were overlaid with other images like **photismos** (illumination), **palingenesia** (re-birth), **theopoiesis** (deification), not to mention 'initiation' itself. A little earlier Cyril of Jerusalem presented the sacraments as a means whereby the believer passes from sin to righteousness, receives the Spirit and is united with Christ: 'Christ was really crucified, really buried and truly rose . . . in order that partaking in the imitation of his sufferings in truth we might gain salvation.' Chrism means that we become 'Christs', anointed with the Holy Spirit. Theodore's attitudes stand within a consistent tradition, at a time when all the forces of history were working towards uniformity of belief and practice.

#### b) **Infant baptism and believers' baptism**

In this period, the majority of baptisms were still adult, but infant baptism was already practised. Clear evidence for infant baptism is only found in the early Third Century. Yet the desire to incorporate one's children into the people of the new covenant, the new community of the new age/world surely existed from the earliest times, and may well be reflected in references to the baptism of households (e.g. Acts 16:15; 1 Cor. 1:16). The Jewish practice of circumcising infants as a sign of their incorporation into the people of the covenant provided an obvious model; the parallel is explicit in early Christian writings, already perhaps implicit in Col. 2:11f. Circumcision in the Spirit, which was often contrasted with Jewish circumcision according to the flesh, would naturally be associated with baptism, as long as it was regarded as baptism in water and the Spirit (but see below (c) (ii)). Christians were soon known as 'the third race' (i.e. neither Jew nor Gentile), and to become a Christian implied a membership and an allegiance as concrete as being born or adopted into a particular race or family – a child has little say about that. Yet 'believers' baptism' inevitably remained the norm as long as Christians were a minority in a predominantly pagan society, a situation which remained long after the conversion of Constantine. The collection of catechetical lectures with which we began can be paralleled in the West (the author of **De Mysteriis**, Ambrose and Augustine): bishops everywhere saw that 'training in Church membership' was conducted

during Lent, and baptism was an important and dramatic part of the Easter Liturgy.

c) **Doctrinal and Pastoral Problems associated with Baptism**

(i) One of the problematic issues faced by the Fathers arose out of the sense of radical transfer – namely the problem of postbaptismal sin. If baptism implied that sin was eliminated and re-creation had taken place, then perfection was to be expected once the sacrament had been performed. Heb. 6.4 was taken to mean that anyone who sinned after baptism was doomed. One solution was the development of the penitential system, against which the Reformation was such a profound protest at a later date. But in the context of the early Church it was a positive response to the problem of being in the world while theoretically not being of it: the rigorism of Novatianism had its attractions even into the Fifth Century, as Socrates the historian bears witness, but it was in practice untenable. The other solution was the widely attested practice of delaying baptism till one was on one's death-bed or preparing to take monastic vows, for in either case the risks of sinning afterwards were reduced. The fact that preachers speak so often against this tendency attests its popularity. Neither solution was without unfortunate consequences, the one encouraging the natural human tendency to clock up merits or sit loose to sin, the other creating two classes of Christians, the perfect ascetics and those who did not even try. Nevertheless the very existence of the problem bears witness to the instability of the New Testament's tension between the 'now' and the 'not yet' of the Kingdom and to the continued recognition that baptism implied a once-for-all eschatological transfer.

(ii) Another problem arose from a failure to hold together the two moments implicit in this dramatic transfer – namely, the washing away of the past and the entry into the new creation through reception of the 'seal of the Spirit'. Particularly in the West, the gift of the Spirit came to be associated with chrism or the laying on of hands by the bishop, baptism in water having been performed by a presbyter – the separation of baptism and confirmation was under way (G. W. H. Lampe, **The Seal of the Spirit**). Baptism itself was thus reduced to the symbolism of cleansing. This implies previous sin, and the reason for baptising infants became a matter for speculation. Certainly in the Second Century it was assumed that infants were innocent, and infant baptism does not seem to have originated from the idea that they needed cleansing (though Origen argued this – but then he thought we were all here because of pre-mundane sin). The Greek Fathers remained reluctant to consider new-born children sinful, and even Ambrose spoke of baptism opening the kingdom of heaven to them, rather than cleansing them. Still the established practice of baptising infants became an important argument for the doctrine of original sin once the meaning of baptism had been narrowed by the liturgical development to which attention has been drawn. Had the whole drama been held together the doctrinal arguments might not have followed precisely the same course. Yet the sense of transfer from one age to another, from one sphere to another, from belonging to Adam's race to that of Christ, was such that the notion of corporate sin and salvation could certainly have produced the same effect, in spite of the individualising and moralising tendencies of the Fathers.

(iii) The third issue concerned the baptism of heretics and schismatics. If such characters sought entry to the Church, should they be regarded as baptised or not? Cyprian thought not; Stephen, bishop of Rome, differed, recommending

the laying on of hands as alone necessary. Cyprian's answer may reflect a continued perception of the whole baptismal act as one, while Stephen's arose from a tendency to split the two phases, devaluing baptism and enhancing the rites performed by the bishop. But there were also other issues: did the validity of baptism depend upon the purity/soundness of the minister? or on the faith of the believer? or on God? Stephen's answer meant an emphasis upon God as the source of grace in baptism irrespective of human failing – a good theoretical position, yet potentially dangerous as it could turn baptism into a magic act in which the words spoken were efficacious no matter who spoke them or in what context. Nevertheless this position was reinforced by the later controversy with the Donatists. It was in that connection that Augustine distinguished between the validity of a sacrament and its efficaciousness: the sacrament is like a brand-mark which cannot be lost or effaced, so the baptism of schismatics is technically valid; yet the grace of the sacrament can only be received within the one holy catholic and apostolic Church. The same insistence upon the action of God is to be found in the East, Chrysostom for example insisting that the priest is merely the instrument who opens his mouth, while God accomplishes what is done. This emphasis bears some comparison with the paedo-baptists' insistence on the priority of God's grace.

#### d) Conclusions

A sense of radical transfer was paramount in the patristic understanding of baptism, though problems arose from failure to hold the whole drama together and to live with the 'eschatological tension' of the now and the not yet. These problems were not merely theoretical, however. They were problems with a practical pastoral dimension. A dying child had to be baptised to ensure its future salvation; salvation was forfeited if sin occurred after baptism, so a compassionate solution had to be found. The Fathers responded to the pastoral problems and modified the 'theory' to take account of practical challenges: post-baptismal sin was a real practical issue and the penitential system was a practical answer to it. Most problems surrounding baptism involve the difficulty of keeping in balance the divine re-creative act of grace and the human response; overemphasis on the first can produce a mechanical or magical view, overemphasis on the second can produce too moralistic and individual an emphasis.

If the Fathers retained the radical character of baptism in spite of such developments as post-baptismal sin and the lessening of the New Testament's eschatological tension, then to be true to the tradition, it is the **decisiveness** of baptism that must be retained. But two other points need to be emphasised: (i) the Fathers were well aware that baptism is but the beginning of a continual struggle to live 'between the ages' – as Theodore certainly perceived; (ii) the focus on radical transfer must not be allowed to obscure the Fathers' determination to hold creation and salvation together as one on-going activity of one God. To divorce the two results in a denial of the world and an elitism of the saved, which is almost entirely individualistic as well as esoteric. This was why the Fathers were implacably hostile to Gnosticism, which in differing forms is a perennial heresy. In the face of it they were determined to affirm creation's goodness and the corporate reality of the Church. This always provided some check upon the implicit dualism of the emphasis on radical transfer, and enabled some to see baptism as the culmination of a pilgrimage, others as its beginning.

## 2. The Middle Ages

The Middle Ages saw the division between East and West not least in the practices of Initiation. In the East, the various rites with water-baptism as their hinge were delegated to the local presbyters and administered as a unity, normally to infants, who were at once admitted to communion. In the West, the development referred to above was consolidated: infant baptism became universal, but required completion in an episcopal ceremony known as confirmation. This led to a theory which has had considerable prominence in our own time, e.g. in the writings of Anglicans such as A. J. Mason, Gregory Dix and L. S. Thornton, that Baptism is the washing away of sin and new birth, but confirmation, the laying on of a bishop's hands, is the gift of the Holy Spirit, essential to full Christian life and a prerequisite of the reception the Eucharist. The almost universal acceptance of infant baptism in both East and West is a phenomenon which demands some enquiry as to its causes. In the West the doctrine of original sin and the belief that unbaptised babies are consigned to hell was certainly powerful. This we must repudiate along with magical notions of baptismal grace. But we must not ignore the glorious hope of society redeemed, of the baptism of Europe – and the world – into the faith, of an all-embracing Christian culture. It is no exaggeration to claim the splendours of medieval Christendom as in some sense the fruit of infant baptism; and to complement the 'modern' evangelical emphasis on individual conversion and personal experience of Christ with the vision of the Holy Catholic Church.

## 3. The Reformation Churches

### a) Luther

Luther at first rejoiced that God's mercy 'has preserved at least this one sacrament unspoiled and unspotted by man-made ordinances, and made it free to all races and classes of men', but he came to a somewhat uneasy position in his desire to stress both the objectivity of Divine Grace, the promise or word of God, and the need for faith in the person to be baptised. A profane priest may administer a valid baptism, but not in the absence of the impulse of faith in the recipient. Yet this could have made his retention of infant baptism an embarrassment. Can infants have faith?

Luther made much of the vicarious faith of those who present infants for baptism, and of the power of God's word and the prayers of a believing Church to infuse faith into the hearts of the ungodly and the unconscious. But in his **Greater Catechism**, he sails near to contradiction of what he has said elsewhere, yet may be thought by some to have resolved the dilemma rather nicely.

. . . it is not of the utmost importance whether he who is baptised has faith or not, for this will not make the baptism wrong: everything depends on God's word and command . . . For my faith does not make the baptism, but receives baptism . . . We bring the child in the belief and hope that it has faith, and pray God to give it faith; but we do not baptise it on this account, but solely because God has commanded it. (**Primary Works** ed. Wace and Buckheim (London 1896) pp.138ff.)

Luther poured scorn on Confirmation as episcopal 'monkey play' and a substitute for the work of grace in the heart; yet he was willing to retain it not as a Sacrament but as a solemn seal and blessing on the work of catechesis.

#### b) Calvin and the Reformed position

The focal theme of Calvinism is not predestination or election but union with Christ. For Calvin, baptism is:

1. The sign of our initiation into the Church, by which we are 'engrafted in Christ'. (**Institutes**, ed. F. S. Battles, SCM Library of Christian Classics, p.1301).
2. A token and proof of cleansing and forgiveness. It is not simply 'a token and mark by which we confess one religion before men' (p.1304), but an efficacious sign of God's grace, certifying and sealing to us the forgiveness promised in the Word.
3. Once and for all: 'we must realise that at whatever time we are baptised, we are once and for all purged for an whole life'. (p.1305).
4. A participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the Christian dies to the old life and rises to the new.
5. A sign that we are '... so united to Christ himself that we become sharers in all his blessings.'
6. A public profession of faith before men.

Calvin argued in favour of infant baptism by citing the parallel with the old Covenant.

As Jewish infants were received into the Covenant Community by circumcision, so the children of Christians are rightly received into the Israel of the New Covenant by baptism. They are 'engrafted into the body of the Church'. (p.1332).

He also adduced Christ's blessing of the children. Since Christ invited and blessed little children, we should not exclude them from the sign, and the benefit, of baptism. 'If the Kingdom of heaven belongs to them, why is the sign denied which, so to speak, opens to them a door into the Church . . .?' (p.1330).

Baptism confirms to Christian parents that God's promise and grace are not only to them, but to their children. God's grace can work upon children, even before they reach years of understanding, as we see from John the Baptist's being sanctified in his mother's womb (Luke1:15). Christ himself was sanctified from earliest infancy, that he might sanctify those of every age.

'... infants are baptised into future repentance and faith, and even though these have not yet been formed in them, the seed of both lies hidden within them by the secret working of the Spirit.' Through nurture and instruction, the child grows into an understanding of his baptism.

Calvin abominated the medieval Roman rite of Confirmation, but believed that this had once existed in a purer form, and hoped to see restored some ceremony 'in which the young are presented to God, after giving forth a confession of their faith'.

### c) The Church of England

The English Reformers were unequivocally paedobaptist. Infant Baptism was for them the norm, and Cranmer inveighed against those who denied it. 'O what a gap these men open both to the Donatists and to the Anabaptists . . . the baptism of infants is proved by the plain scriptures'. Cranmer cites baptism as the equivalent under the new law of circumcision which was administered to infants, and Our Lord's attitude to children. 'Infants pertain to God'. This is the consistent testimony of the whole of the Bible. 'Your children are holy now'. (1 Cor. 7.14). The Book of Common Prayer ruthlessly prunes the excesses of Sarum and leaves no doubt that the rite with water is central and all-sufficient, and that Baptism may be a very simple ceremony indeed as when midwives and others administer it in emergency. But Cranmer preferred very much that it be performed by a fully-ordained and authorised minister, not to assert the priestly office but as a counter to superstition, and to affirm that it is a Sacrament of the Church. The Prayer Book, however, moves in uneasy oscillation between the affirmation of God's love for the child, and the damnable state of the old Adam. Its rite has an opening question to ensure that the child has not already been baptised. Episcopal confirmation was retained in the English Church, but the 1552 rite leaves it very open as to whether there is the sacramental imparting of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of the Bishop's hands, – 'the prayer seems to be rather a prayer that may be said by any minister' (John Cosin) – while there is even greater stress on the need for the candidate to have had some rudimentary Christian education and to be able to say the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed.

There have always been those of a Catholic mind contending for the Anglican soul, and the influence of the Oxford Movement, especially, has sought to elevate confirmation and to find proof from the Fathers. 'If we are to assign a greater and less importance between the acts of the initiatory rite, while both are essential, the Fathers would say, confirmation has a greater dignity in that it conveys the specifically Christian gift of the Holy Spirit, and therefore constitutes the true 'christening' of the Christian; and, in conclusion, the Fathers would have pointed to the Roman and Byzantine liturgies as embodying the common mind of Scripture and tradition upon this matter' (E.C. Ratcliff, **Liturgical Studies**, SPCK 1976, p.133). Such views, countered in G.W.H. Lampe's **The Seal of the Spirit** (2nd edn. SPCK 1967), seem somewhat to have lost their force in recent years.

Some mention should be made of the Anglican theologian, Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-72). His Wesleyan contemporary, J. H. Rigg, opposed his ideas, but he appealed to Methodists such as Hugh Price Hughes and John Scott Lidgett, not least for his universalism, which seemed a restatement of the Methodist belief that the Gospel is for **all**. Not only did he point out, as Calvin had said before him, that to deny infant baptism would be to make the new covenant narrower than the old, since the Jews circumcised baby boys, but he saw Christ as head of all mankind and Calvary as in some sense the world's baptism. He was powerfully aware of both its societal and 'mystical' dimensions.

#### d) **The Radical Reformation**

No survey, however rapid, of the history of Initiation can be complete without calling attention to the radical Christians who proliferated at the time of the Reformation and after the Civil Wars in England. Their longing for God and desire for immediacy of Communion made them often sacramentalists in the general sense, looking for symbols of the Divine, seeking unity with all creation, and fearful lest God be imprisoned in means and outward conformity be a substitute for the work of the Spirit. As George Fox said of the Lord's Supper 'it is a nearer and a further state to be in fellowship with (Christ) in his death than to take bread and wine in remembrance of his death'. Some Separatists and Pilgrim Fathers who believed strongly that the Sacraments could not be administered without an authorised Pastor found their hold on the ordinances weakening when deprived of them through lack of a Pastor, yet their faith did not waver nor their spiritual life decline. Thus Henry Barrow could say 'Sacraments are not a perpetual Mark of the Church'. What mattered was not water-baptism but baptism in the Spirit. John Bunyan is usually claimed as a Baptist, but he was in fact extremely 'open' as in his treatise 'Differences in Judgement about Water Baptism No Bar to Communion':

I do not plead for a despising of baptism, but bearing with our brother that cannot do with it for want of light . . . The best of baptism he hath . . . he is baptised by that one Spirit; he hath the heart of water baptism; the signification thereof; he wanteth only the outward show.

Such tolerance was not exceptional. It finds some echo as does the whole radical voice with regard to Sacraments in early Primitive Methodism. (See G. F. Nuttall 'Early Quakerism and Early Primitive Methodism'. **The Puritan Spirit** (1967) p.204ff.)

#### 4. **The Traditions of Methodism**

Wesley defined a sacrament as 'an outward sign of inward grace and a means whereby we receive the same'. (**Fifty-three Sermons**, London 1771, p.208). He regarded sacraments as the ordinances of God but warned of the danger of mistaking 'the means for the end and to place religion rather in those outward works than in a heart renewed after the image of God'. (op.cit.206). As an Anglican Wesley practised infant baptism, but his thinking and teaching about it lacked clarity. He regarded it as unrepeatable, but had doubts in early years as to the validity of Dissenters' baptism.

'There is no doubt at all that Wesley believed in the Baptismal Regeneration of infants. 'What is implied in the being a son or a child of God, or having the Spirit of adoption? That these privileges, by the free mercy of God, are ordinarily annexed to Baptism (which is thence termed by our Lord . . . the being born of water and of the Spirit) we know.' We may suppose that in this passage he is referring to infants only, for in a later Sermon, in which he is more explicit on the subject, he says that in the case of adults baptism and the new birth are not the same thing – the external sign is certainly distinguishable, and is often separate, from the inward grace. But in regard to infants, in the same passage he continues: 'It is certain our Church supposes that all who are baptised in their infancy are at the same time born again; and it is allowed that the whole office for the Baptism of Infants proceeds upon this supposition. Nor is it

an objection of any weight against this, that we cannot comprehend how this work can be wrought in infants. For neither can we comprehend how is it wrought in a person of riper years!’ Lest we be tempted to think that Wesley did not hold this view very wholeheartedly himself, but felt himself forced to accept it on the authority of the Church, he sets out the full arguments for Infant Baptism as a means of regeneration, the washing away of Original Sin, admission into the New Covenant and into the Church, and inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven, in a treatise published specifically for that purpose in 1756, and never retracted. Here he shows that, according to the intention of Jesus, there is no other means of entering the Church, or heaven, and the outward baptism is a necessary means to the inward. He argues that since infants are capable of entering into a covenant; since the infants of believers are included within the covenant of grace; since infants ought to come to Christ and enter His Church; since the Apostles baptised infants; therefore infants are proper subjects for baptism. And to the argument that faith and repentance are necessary before the new birth can take place, he answers that they were equally necessary before circumcision could be performed under the Old Covenant, and yet God ordered infants to be circumcised.’

(R.E. Davies, **History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain**, (Epworth Press 1965) I 160)

Wesley seems to have believed that infants were born again in baptism, but by their own folly, lost the grace of God given through it. Such people set up accursed things in the soul ‘which was once a temple of the Holy Ghost’ (op.cit.p.646). Elsewhere he writes, ‘Lean no more on the staff of that broken reed that ye were born again in baptism. Who denies that ye were then made children of God and heirs of the kingdom of heaven? But, notwithstanding this, ye are now children of the devil. Therefore, ye must be born again’ (op.cit.p.247).

In his adaptation of the Order of Service for Infant Baptism, Wesley omitted the questions put to the godparents, and substituted no questions to the parents; it would seem that in his view, baptism should be administered without qualification as a divine gift.

Following Wesley, it would seem that the main streams of Methodism practised infant baptism as the norm.

The Primitive Methodists of 1860 and the United Methodist Free Church of 1867 sprinkled infants with water in the name of the Trinity. The Primitive Methodists prayed for the child ‘that he may receive the inward and spiritual grace symbolised by the outward and visible sign by being baptised with the Holy Spirit’. (Cf. **Primitive Methodist Service Book**, 1860, p.9. **United Methodist Free Church Service** 1867, pp.15-16.)

The Wesleyan Sunday Service Book (pre-1879) refers to the sprinkling or dipping of infants in the name of the Trinity and has a service for those ‘of riper years’ (pp. 69, 71).

The classic nineteenth century work of Wesleyan Systematic Theology is W.B. Pope’s three-volume **Compendium of Christian Doctrine** (Second Edition 1879). He is a strong upholder of Infant Baptism. The views that ‘none are to

be admitted to (Church) membership who do not give credible evidence of being regenerate . . . are altogether too narrow for the spirit of the catholic Gospel'. (III 321). 'The baptism of the children of believing parents is . . . a sign of the washing away of original guilt, and a seal of their adoption into the family of God; a sign of the regeneration which their nature needs and a seal of its impartation in God's good time' (op.cit.318). Pope implies that the blessings of Baptism are not indiscriminate, but reserved for the children of believers and he has no truck with a doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration, 'which, as ordinarily accepted unevangelically links the sign and the thing signified' (op.cit.324).

The true doctrine . . . makes baptism the initiatory sign of a covenant the blessings of which it most aptly symbolises: the sprinkled blood and the Spirit poured out. It makes it also the seal of a covenant which pledges these blessings to all who believe and dedicate their children to Christ; a seal therefore of an impartation which is quite distinct from the seal, though it may accompany it, as it may have preceded it, and may also, as in part it must do so to unconscious infancy, follow the seal. Its importance therefore is great in its own order. To the adult, who received it in infancy, it remains a perpetual memory of a most solemn obligation; and to him who receives it as an adult it is a present encouragement to faith, and a pledge to his faith of present union with the Lord. To our children it is, when they come to know its responsibilities, a memorial of blessings provided for them before they were born. And on the congregation administering it by its appointed ministers to infants it enforces the necessity of taking all spiritual care of its little ones. (ibid.)

The Wesleyan revision of the Service in 1882, under the anti-Oxford movement polemic of J. H. Rigg, removed the Prayer Book's pessimism as to the state of nature and all implications that the child is born again in baptism.

Most subsequent liturgies before 1936 include services for both infants and adults (or those of riper years). Adult baptism is usually preceded by a renunciation of the world, the flesh and the devil, an affirmation of the credal faith and an expression of the personal desire for salvation in Jesus. Infant baptism in the Wesleyan services was by sprinkling, pouring or dipping. In the Primitive Methodist tradition water was sprinkled and such sprinkling was preceded by a prayer for the Holy Spirit to be given that the infant 'may be born again'. The United Methodists of 1913 made a distinction: 'We baptise with water; One only baptiseth with the Holy Ghost'.

Thus, before, as after, 1936, the norm was the practice of infant baptism despite differing beliefs about the sacramental meaning and significance, with services for Adults or for those of riper years available. Nowhere is the phrase 'believers' baptism' used.

Methodist scholarship supports the practice of infant baptism and justifies it on both scriptural and historical grounds.

A book by a Methodist scholar, which, known and used far outside Methodism, was regarded as definitive for many years, is W. F. Flemington, **The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism** (SPCK 1947). This argues that all the NT and early evidence points to the hypothesis that infant baptism began to be practised during the first century.

In his concluding chapter, Flemington places infant baptism strongly in the evangelical tradition. He writes: 'Infant baptism, so far from being less evangelical than believers' baptism is in reality more so, because it even more unmistakably embodies the primary truth of the Christian gospel, namely that the grace of God comes before everything else, and that man's only hope of salvation rests upon that Act of God in Jesus Christ, from which (as the chief writers of the New Testament so clearly and so unanimously demonstrate) this sacrament of the gospel draws all its meaning and efficacy' (op. cit. p. 146 f).

On the historical evidence and in every statement adopted by the Church since Methodist union, no doctrine, with the possible exception of the non-priestly nature of the ministry has been affirmed so unequivocally as Methodism's adherence to paedo-baptism. In 1936 a Memorandum solemnly declared:

We assert in common with the general body of the Church of Christ, that a solemn obligation to Christ, the Church and the child rests upon parents to present their children to Christ in Baptism, and thus to honour the ancient ordinance whereby they are joined to the visible community of Christ's people.

This was repeated in the **Statement on Holy Baptism** of 1952, and re-affirmed in the **Statement on Church Membership** in 1961. The 1952 **Statement** sums up its theological argument as follows:

The Methodist Church believes the Baptism of Infants to be in accordance with the mind of Christ. Not only is it sanctioned by the practice of the Church since very early times; it proclaims and offers the grace of God, who is eternally active for the salvation of all men, and receives even the youngest into that realm where His promises are gloriously fulfilled. Sin is not simply a matter of individual wrong-doing; each one of us is also involved in the sin of the world, in the community of evil. When an infant is baptised, he is received into the new Israel of God, which is God's answer to the community of evil.

This is in no sense contradicted by the preamble to the **Statement** which disclaims any intention of promulgating dogmatic definition or imposing on the Methodist people 'any one of the varying interpretations of the Sacrament of Baptism which have been held among us'.

A document presented to the 1975 Conference entitled **Ministers in Full Connexion and Baptism** set out ministerial responsibilities relating to baptism. It is clear that Methodist ministers 'are and ought to be expected to baptise infants'. Also, where a student or probationer is not willing to baptise infants, he should not be ordained into the ministry of our church. Moreover, 'our discipline and pastoral practice do not allow exceptions in the matter of Methodist ministers being willing to baptise infants'.

For parents who desired their children to be dedicated, the 1976 Conference declared that ministers were 'free to draw up and conduct services of Thanksgiving and Dedication without Baptism wherever they judge it to be advisable' but the production and distribution of a service of Thanksgiving and Dedication by the Faith and Order Committee was deemed 'not advisable at present'.

With regard to the pastoral problems relating to baptism, it was reaffirmed that 'no one shall be baptised who is known to have been baptised already' and that 'the practice of baptising as adults those who had already been baptised as infants was contrary to our practice and implied a view of baptism incompatible with our doctrines'. Appropriate means of the renewal of baptism were seen to be the laying on of hands, the Covenant Service and Holy Communion. Regarding any other means, 'the use of water as in baptism should be discouraged, even when the rite is stated not to be baptism'.

On the question of the relation of baptism to church membership, the 1961 Report on Church Membership reiterated the words of the 1952 statement on Baptism, that the Order of Service for the Baptism of Infants is a service of 'reception into the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church' and that 'when an infant is baptised, he is received into the new Israel of God'. The Report concludes that 'every child who is baptised with water in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, has been received at Baptism into the congregation of Christ's flock'. Since the second war there has been increased stress on 'preparation for full membership' of those baptised in infancy. The term 'confirmation' was added as an alternative title of the reception service in 1962 to give emphasis to prayer for the operation of the Holy Spirit as well as personal commitment.

## **Some Contemporary Christian Experience**

### **1. The ferment of renewal**

As we said at the outset, this in large part has necessitated our undertaking, but certain features require explicit mention.

Lesslie Newbigin in **The Household of God** (1952) treated Pentecostalism as a third major stream in Christendom and a manifestation of this is the contemporary charismatic movement (sometimes designated neo-pentecostalism) which has emerged amongst nearly all the historic denominations. Those involved in it claim to have had an experience similar to that of the first disciples on the day of Pentecost. The movement is world-wide and has found expression in a variety of ways, all of which are concerned with renewal.

- a) The most marked effect has been in personal renewal: a new reality to prayer life; a joyous, liberated approach to worship; the proliferation of new hymns and spiritual songs arising directly from experience and scripture; an awareness of the reality of Christ; an assurance of being accepted as God's sons and daughters and a release of the gifts of the Holy Spirit described in the New Testament.
- b) The movement has led to a desire to see the whole church renewed. Whilst, some, disillusioned with church structures, have left the mainstream to seek the ideal church based on scriptural principles, others have remained within their churches to work and pray for renewal there. As a result, some churches have been renewed in their life of worship, prayer, witness and fellowship. Such spontaneous renewal has run parallel with liturgical renewal, inspiring new forms of worship, lively and exuberant. Despite the divisions caused by the formation of House Churches, there has also been a trend towards church unity, ardent and zealous, running parallel with the ecumenical movement.

- c) There has been a renewed interest in social concern. In Brazil, for example, the church has been stirred to greater industrial undertakings in order to deal with unemployment. Here, political and social engagement go hand in hand with evangelism. In Italy, renewal has touched the deprived classes (fishermen, low-grade municipal employees, etc) and, although the pastors do not carry out any political activity, many of their followers have joined the Communist trade union and vote for the Communist Party. In Latin America in particular, renewal has both stimulated liberation theology and discovered its own theological expression within it. Liberation theology finds its paradigm in the exodus from Egypt and the passing of Israel through the Red Sea is the archetype of Christian baptism.

As was noted at the outset of this Report, a consequence of personal renewal has been for some a conviction that the appropriate way to affirm and seal what has happened is through this sacrament of baptism. Among these have been people already baptised as infants. Despite counselling to the effect that they should appropriate by faith the grace given in infant baptism, or that they should affirm their renewal through the eucharist or the covenant service, the rich symbolism of immersion – dying to self and rising to newness of life in Christ – has been the only means of satisfying the conscience. Therefore, because their own church has been unwilling to re-baptise, they have sought such re-baptism elsewhere in the belief that they are doing this in obedience to Christ.

## **2. Ecumenical Perspectives**

There is a weight of material due to the immediacy and complexities of the subject and the valuable investigations being carried out by the British Council of Churches. It is impossible to do more than indicate briefly the present policies of the mainstream denominations and the questions being asked.

### **(a) Other Denominational Practices**

#### **The Roman Catholic Church**

In the Roman Church, the total act of initiation is 'reception into full communion with the Catholic Church through baptism, confirmation and admission to Holy Communion'. It is believed that this unites a person to Christ so that he becomes one with him in his love for the Father and for all mankind. In this union, through which is forgiveness and sanctification, the redemption of the individual lies. He becomes one with Christ in mind and will and also in action – eucharistic and apostolic.

Initiation normally takes place in and through the local church, which has been defined as 'a section of the people of God entrusted to a bishop, to be guided by him with the assistance of his clergy so that, loyal to its pastor and formed by him into one community in the Holy Spirit through the gospel and the eucharist, it constitutes one particular church in which the one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active'.

Baptism is usually administered in infancy. Admission to the communion has usually been at the age of seven, and confirmation is now often postponed until adolescence, when it follows a course of preparation which is also the case with adults who have 'become believers'. A new rite of 'Christian initiation for

adults' has been extant since 1972. This provides guidelines for a restored catechumenate of reception by stages.

If a convert has been baptised already, and can produce evidence of the fact, there is no re-baptism. If there is doubt or uncertainty, there will be private administration of **conditional** baptism, for which the formula is 'if you are not baptised, I baptise you in the name . . .' There will be private confession with absolution from the priest, though if baptism is conferred absolutely, there is no confession, because baptism of itself wipes away sin. If baptism is conferred conditionally, absolution in the sacrament of penance is correspondingly conditional.

Full baptism and confirmation have essential and invariable formulae. Baptism is with water in the name of the Trinity. It is administered by a priest. Confirmation is by the imposition of hands and the words 'N be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit'. This is usually administered by a bishop, though he has powers of delegation. Chrism – the holy oil of priesthood – is administered in both rites – immediately after baptism; concurrently with the imposition of hands in confirmation. In baptism, a member of the local Christian community, who must be a Catholic, stands as sponsor.

All the baptised are 'full members' of the Church according to their capacity. There is no distinction between children and adults, though clearly they cannot be expected to do the same things or fulfil the same demands. Church membership is the living of the baptismal life through its supreme expression in the eucharist, but also through the extension of the sacraments into many obligations and duties, which are carefully defined. Baptismal vows are renewed verbally and by the ceremony of **Asperges** usually associated with the Easter ceremonies. The priest walks among those reaffirming their promises and sprinkles them, often with a palm branch dipped in water.

### **Church of England**

Infant baptism is the norm in the Book of Common Prayer, but in the Alternative Service Book of the Church of England the adult rite is now placed first. It is increasingly realised that a dual practice is acceptable, and indeed inevitable. But there is no sense in which infant baptism is invalid or that baptism itself can be repeated.

There is now a greater emphasis on the fact that baptism is admission to the Church, and must have its setting in the Christian community. It should be administered at the parish eucharist. Private baptisms are now in many instances discouraged. It is always administered with water, and in the name of the Trinity.

The 1966 report of the Liturgical Commission, **Baptism and Confirmation**, described three possible views as to the relation between baptism and confirmation.

The first view is: Baptism in water is the sacramental means by which the Spirit is given to Christians. Confirmation is the occasion in which Christians renew the acts of repentance and faith which were made in their name, or which they themselves made, at their baptism. They do this in the presence of the bishop who solemnly blesses them; and this blessing may be regarded as an occasion of grace.

The second view is: Baptism in water is the sacramental means by which the Spirit is given to Christians. Confirmation is a second sacramental act, consisting of prayer for the coming of the Spirit with the laying on of hands upon those upon whom the Spirit is asked to come. It effects a further work of the Spirit, to assist them against temptation.

The third view is: Baptism in water and prayer with the laying on of hands together constitute the sacramental means by which the Spirit is given to Christians. If the two sacramental acts are distinguished in thought or separated in practice, the Spirit is thought to come in baptism to effect cleansing from sin and the new birth and in confirmation to complete the divine indwelling.

Because anointing is frequently associated with the Spirit in the scriptures, it is restored as an optional practice in the initiation rite of the Alternative Service Book.

There is awareness of the fact that confirmation may be misunderstood as 'completion'. It should rather be a stage in the process of Christian growth. In many places admission of young people to communion before confirmation is being tried as an experiment.

### **Reformed Churches**

- (i) **The Church of Scotland** remains vigorously and unequivocally paedobaptist. Baptism belongs only within the life of the Church, where it accompanies and seals the preaching of the gospel. Infant baptism is believed to be wholly scriptural. Evidence for it is found in the baptism of households, but even more in the nature of the scripture message – the covenant with Abraham and his seed, fulfilled and perfected in the new covenant in Jesus Christ. The early church baptised women, thus being more inclusive than the old covenant, which confined circumcision to males. But it is inconceivable that it would be narrower than the old covenant in excluding children, especially since, under the gospel, we are all as little children, recipients of the free grace of God.

'Baptism does not arise out of any work of ours, but is baptism into the work of Christ on our behalf, and must be linked with the practice of the word which tells of that divine work. It is not offered to us as the vindication of anything we have done, or as an expression of anything we have done, or an approval of anything we have done or promised. None of these is the thing signified by the sign. What is signified is what God has done, does and will do. On this alone can human lives be grounded.'

'In Reformed language, baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, not a badge of our decision or conversion, important as these are.'

Baptism is unrepeatable because Christ's saving work is once for all and completed, and by baptism he applies this finished work to us specifically by uniting us with himself and incorporating us in his body. It is as impossible to repeat baptism as to repeat the individual's human birth. It is as unique as birth – or death.

Confirmation, at an age when a person is able to answer for himself, is confirmation of baptism and admission to the Lord's Supper. It demands confession of faith and is administered as the minister, the presbyter, either raises his hand in blessing or lays a hand on each head. The hand of welcome into the Church may also be offered.

In the mid seventies the Church of Scotland was experiencing increasing controversy over the question of second baptism, involving elders and ministers as well as lay people. This came to a head in 1974-76 at the bar of the General Assembly, as a result of which the Assembly reaffirmed the traditional 'One baptism for the remission of sins' and subsequently measures were taken to deal with those in breach of the 1963 Act Anent Baptism. In the case of ministers and elders the alternatives were recantation by affirmation of the Act, or resignation.

#### (ii) **The United Reformed Church**

Initiation is by baptism and confirmation. Baptism should normally be administered in the presence of the congregation and be brought into close relation with the prayers of the faithful, the offertory and, when the eucharist is celebrated, communion. It is administered with water in the name of the Trinity. Infant baptism precedes believers' baptism in the United Reformed Service Book. In the case of someone who is able to make a profession of faith, baptism and confirmation are to be seen as two parts of a whole act. Confirmation takes place by the minister laying his hand on the head of each of the candidates in turn, or raising his hand in blessing over each, beginning with those who have just been baptised.

There is a clear understanding that baptism is once for all and therefore 're-baptism' is not condoned.

Baptism includes a stress on the covenant relationship of God and His people – 'the promise is to you and to your children . . .' Godparents are optional. With the unification of Churches of Christ with the URC, there are now parallel forms of Christian initiation. The Churches of Christ practise believers' baptism. The URC denomination now has a wide variety of practice including thanksgiving for the birth of a child, infant dedication, infant baptism and believers' baptism.

In its **Guidelines on Baptism** it is stated that 'nothing should be done in conformity with one practice that casts doubt on the integrity of the other' and that 'no-one shall be required to administer a form or mode of baptism to which he has a conscientious objection.'

All who are baptised are 'members of the Church'. The majority would probably describe a church member as someone who has been baptised and confirmed into membership of the one, holy catholic and apostolic Church, and received as such in a particular local congregation by Church Meeting, their name being entered on the Roll of Members of that congregation. This does not normally happen to children, so an effective distinction is made between those who are members by baptism and those entitled to vote at Church Meeting or be eligible for the eldership. Some churches have had a category of junior member, usually 13-16 year olds, who are confirmed but cannot vote at Church Meeting. This is tending to die out. The question of whether or not baptised children

should receive communion is under discussion in several congregations but as yet there is no agreed denominational stance.

Initiation means sharing in the life of the Church within the local church. This gives entry to the life of the Church throughout the world and indeed to the communion of saints which has fellowship with the church triumphant.

### **The Baptist Church**

(a) The act of admission to full membership of the church is usually referred to as 'believers' baptism' or 'admission to membership by believers' baptism'.

(b) There is no prescribed Order of Service or form of words which are always used. There is always a confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. In some churches this is prefaced by a personal testimony describing the events leading to conversion. After a confession of faith the candidate is baptised by immersion in the Name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In some churches the minister (and deacon/elder) may lay hands upon the candidate before the Communion of the Lord's Supper which follows the baptism although this is far from normal practice. The right hand of fellowship into the Church is given by the minister which takes the form of shaking of the hand and normally a certificate of baptism and church membership is given.

(c) There are no essential words apart from the confession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The essential act is that of immersion in water.

(d) The act of baptism is normally carried out by the minister of the church but another person may be authorised by the church to conduct the baptism. Some churches appoint a mature Christian to act as 'sponsor' for the new believer who will act as guide and encourager both before baptism and for a period after it.

It must not be forgotten that Baptist churches are divided into two categories (1) closed membership churches, which by trust deed, and therefore church rules, may receive into membership only those who have been baptised as believers by immersion; (2) open membership churches practice believer's baptism as the normal mode of entry into the church, but welcome members of other churches by letter of transfer or some other form of commendation.

The closed Baptist churches may have a rule of associate membership, whereby members will be welcomed to the Lord's Table even if they have not been baptised. In the open churches, there is an open Table.

The service of dedication for the children of Christian parents has been found to create difficulties and confusions and is much better seen as a service of thanksgiving. This both the Church of England and the Methodist Church may be inclined to adopt at a time when fewer people may be baptised in infancy. There is a certain amount of theological discussion in the Baptist churches as to whether the paedo-Baptism and believer's baptism patterns of initiation may not properly co-exist. The Baptist churches remain adamant that the New Testament evidence for infant baptism is scanty indeed, and that its profound significance is for believers, but it has been maintained that New Testament theology allows both for vicarious faith and the reality of a child's faith, while a psychological approach argues that both forms of baptism testify to different truths for the individual's development from childhood on. It has also been argued that the two different patterns of baptism arose in church history through

mal-administration. If the oneness of baptism could be reaffirmed, this might be important both for Christian renewal and reunion.

Our chief concern is with the Churches in the main Catholic and Reformed tradition but it is interesting to note that the Seventh-Day Adventists practice Baptism on profession of faith, performed by an ordained minister. Quakers, on the other hand, observe no Sacraments and admit as members those who feel at one with Friends and wish to join, and who are discerned by appointed visitors to be humble learners in the school of Christ with their faces set towards the light.

#### **(b) Local Ecumenical Projects**

In general all Churches recognise each others' baptisms as being into the universal Church. (Strict Baptists do not but they do not engage in ecumenical projects.)

The problem is likely to arise over Confirmation. Many projects have joint confirmation as an essential element; and this is confirmation of membership in the universal Church. Anglicans insist on the laying of **episcopal** hands and so the authorised service provides for the appropriate Methodist or Free Church minister to share in this. This gives joint communicant membership. The problem arises when those thus confirmed leave the project. They then have to opt for membership of one Church, though without losing the joint membership. The joint confirmations are experienced as expressions of Christian unity and solemn commissioning for witness and service in the world.

#### **(c) Thoughts from Abroad**

(i) Whilst the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand affirms, with paedobaptist churches world-wide that baptism is unrepeatable it has come to the view that it is renewable. The Presbyterian Church in New Zealand recognised that there was a 'felt need for significant services for times of personal renewal and dedication for service'. Its Doctrinal Commission recommended two services of renewal; 'A service of Renewal and Discipleship' and 'A service of Renewal – Appropriating Baptism' which included immersion. At each of these services it is recommended that a Statement of Intention is read. The statement is an explanation that whilst for some members the call to Christian discipleship 'has been renewed in a deep and satisfying way'; for others the service provides 'the opportunity for renewal and rededication, which will it is hoped revive and increase the grace of their Baptism and Confirmation'.

(ii) The Methodist Church of Southern Africa held a seminar on Baptism in 1983, because it is confronted by precisely the issues in which we are engaged. The resulting memorandum was presented to the Conference which referred it to the Doctrinal Commission. The Assistant General Missionary Secretary opines that 'we have only just begun a long debate of great significance for the whole Methodist Church'. Some maintain that this is solely a 'white issue', since most of the black churches are completely committed to infant baptism, but he does not agree.

(d) **The British Council of Churches**

As a somewhat delayed result of a Consultation in 1979, the BCC has appointed a group 'to examine with urgency and with a concern for practical ecumenism the theology and practice of Christian initiation and church membership'. The 1979 Consultation included a paper by Dr David Thompson, then of the Churches of Christ, which interestingly widened the discussion to point the interaction between baptismal practice and social and political factors. He concluded by raising two questions for our time:

- (i) In an age which has seen **both** the strengthening of the nuclear family unit as a norm of social life and an unparalleled sentimentalising of family relationships, **and** an increasing break up of family life by divorce rather than by death of partners, how do we keep alive as a real option the infant baptism ideal of nurture in a Christian family?
- (ii) In an age which has seen a new degree of geographical mobility, how do we keep alive as a real option the idea of the church as a nurturing community for those baptised either as infants or adults? In what sense is the local church a community today? How can we avoid the retreat into privatised religious experience?

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS**

### **1. Factors to be taken into account in the present situation**

- a) The exploration of how we express moments of significance in our pilgrimage of faith has been greatly enriched by the bringing together of theological, psychological and sociological insights in contemporary Christian experience. This has shown itself in all of the arts, especially drama, and it has been greatly assisted by the fast-developing media of communication. The Christian faith which we seek to express is world-embracing and life-affirming even though it may demand renunciation, and does not ignore the gravity of sin. In its expression we need to involve every part of our personality, with all our God-given senses, and with the elements of thought, feeling and will informing and strengthening each other. And we need to bring to it all our relationships with the world, with each other, and with the gifts of creation by which our life is sustained and enriched. Wholeness of life may not always be our conscious aim in such expressions of faith as our acts of worship, but it is increasingly seen to be potentially one of its most valuable consequences.
- b) The liturgical movement, and the greater frequency of sacramental worship in many parts of the Church has made possible a greater sense of continuity with the Christian past, a 'convergence' of separated Christians, as in the Lima Document, **Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry**, and an experience of the wholeness of life in worship.
- c) The ferment of renewal being experienced across the Christian tradition is affirming the vivid reality of personal experience in the life of faith through the working of the Holy Spirit. Such life-changing experience needs to be personally expressed and corporately shared in ways which are felt to be more appropriate than existing forms allow. Wholeness of life requires our worship to

be sufficiently varied to give imaginative expression to the things of chief concern and value to us all.

- d) These three movements – cultural, liturgical, personal – often thought of in separation from each other, are in fact intimately related. They all point to the need to integrate as closely as possible our expressions of faith with the context of creation, our human nature, inheritance and relationships, and the experiences of God’s grace appropriate to our various situations and stages of development.
- e) We are encouraged in this approach by the attitudes, words and actions of Jesus. He repeatedly expressed appreciation of the works of nature and of human minds and hands. He made imaginative use of the senses of touch, taste, sight, sound and smell, as well as of the elements of earth, air, fire, water, bread and wine. And he was readily responsive to the concerns and needs of different people through whatever words, actions, and elements seemed most appropriate to the meanings which he desired to express.
- f) The endeavour to integrate words, elements and actions with the gospel of Christ, and with our various situations, may help us to assess some present strengths and weaknesses in our practice of Christian initiation – and thus indicate the most creative way ahead.

## **2. Strengths and weaknesses in present attitudes and practices**

- a) Affirmation of the priority of God’s love, to which our faith and love are a response, is one of the most powerful emphases made in connection with baptism, and particularly with infant baptism. But is not powerfully expressed in the wording of the liturgy. This points to the need for a closer match between affirmations made about and the words used in the rite of baptism.
- b) Thankfulness for the gift of this particular life, for the renewal of our personal and corporate life implied in it and for the wonder of creation and re-creation are responses which are deeply felt. It is clearly desirable that they should be fittingly expressed. The preoccupation with original sin in the Western rites has sometimes excluded these, and although it also expresses the need sometimes felt for cleansing and totally new life, it should be held in tension with natural (and Christian) joy.
- c) The element of water brings with it age-long and powerful associations. It suggests cleansing, refreshment and renewal of life. Water is a gift, not secured by our own exertions. It may also relate at a deeper level in our consciousness to the waters of the womb, the analogy of ‘birth from above’. These meanings are made more specific by association with John the Baptist (repentance and affirmation of faith), Jesus and the other John (the gift of the Holy Spirit, vocation, and enablement), and Paul (sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ, and in the fruits of his risen life). These are tremendous meanings which are not in the remotest way indicated by a drop of water in a saucer at the bottom of a removable font the shape and size of a domestic vase. This points to the need for a much closer correspondence between the meanings affirmed and the elements and actions by which they are expressed.
- d) Some element of commitment is called for in baptism. But commitment has many aspects – the dedication of a child to God; the affirmation of a faith; the making of promises; the offering of oneself in support; the dedication of oneself personally or corporately to God. These are all different from each other, and

distinctions should be more clearly made. We might then be better able to see what is the relative necessity or importance of each, and whether some elements missing in the past are now thought to be essential or whether some which have been insisted upon in the past are now thought to be less essential. For instance, are the promises of parents – or godparents – required to make valid the rite of infant baptism? The tradition would say emphatically ‘No!’ Yet many have felt the parents’ promise to be vital to the rite, and an opening rubric of the Wesleyan Service of 1883 virtually says this.

- e) If eschatological transfer to new life in Christ is seen in the NT and Fathers as a principal meaning of baptism, there are other associated meanings which relate the sacrament to creation as well as redemption, the use of water and incorporation into the human community. Naming is increasingly being seen as an important act of differentiation, recognition, and pronouncement of a new being in Christ – hence the Christian name – as is the introduction to the wider community and the making of new, reciprocal relationships between them. Their importance suggests that we should find words and actions which express them more fully.
- f) Confirmation makes possible to each person a publicly shared affirmation of faith and pledge of loyalty, and a corresponding affirmation by the church about the standing of that person in the community of faith. Reference to it as reception into membership makes unclear its relationship to baptism; how can we be received into membership through confirmation if we are already members through baptism? And the word ‘confirmation’ (‘completion’ rather than ‘strengthening’) suggests the end of a process rather than a new beginning – which may be why it is so often acted upon as such.
- g) Our concept of membership is suffering from a confusion of meaning. Is it a pastoral tool to make sure people are cared for? If so, does not this make the church too inward-looking, and would not the community roll be more appropriate? Does it state who is a voting member of this particular ecclesiastical organisation, and therefore called upon to exercise responsibility, and be eligible for office? If so, would not an ‘electoral roll’ be more effective and less theologically confusing? Is it a financial device for allotting assessments? If so, would not average attendance figures be more to the point? Such distinction might free our concept of membership from the non-theological factors and enable us to say what membership is, when it begins, how it should be acted upon from the moment it begins, and, above all, of what is one made a member?

### 3. Relating Christian Initiation to Rites of Passage and Renewal

- a) Similar questions must be asked of Christian initiation. Into what is a person initiated? The family of God? The Christian Church? The Christian faith? The voting membership of this particular ecclesiastical set-up? Or, mystically, into Christ himself as in some sense more than these, our righteousness in heaven, the very life of God? Are these all the same, or are they different? Does initiation take place into all of these at once? If so, how and when? Or does it take place into different things, in different ways, at different times? If so, how and when? Or does initiation cover the whole process – in which case, no one act or moment can be said to constitute initiation in separation from all the others?

- b) Fresh consideration of the rites of passage encourages us to take seriously the various stages of transition in our development and to find in them a fresh clue to a rite or rites of Christian initiation. Chief among the stages of transition are birth, recognition and incorporation into the community, preparation for and affirmation of personal loyalty and responsibility, and commissioning by the community for a specific status, office or task and death. Rites of passage are most effective when they not only recognise or celebrate a stage of transition, but when they also bring about an existential change appropriate to that stage.
- c) Experiences of insight, refreshment or renewal are also of significance to us, and a full and rich corporate life will wish to take account of them and celebrate them. They do not of themselves signify a stage of transition and they do not bring about an existential change, but they do affect the depth and vividness with which both are experienced and shared.
- d) It follows that initiation is into different things at different stages; that initiation into the same thing cannot be repeated without making a nonsense out of one or other event; that renewal can and should be repeatedly celebrated; and that the forms we use should clarify the meaning of each event, should relate to it and the appropriate Christian meaning, and should express both through an imaginative integration of words, elements and actions.

#### 4. Rites of Passage

- a) Baptism which is a Sacrament of the Gospel and is both the sign of God's grace in Christ and of incorporation in him through the community of the Church. The essential element is water applied by pouring, sprinkling or immersion in the name of the Trinity. There must be emphasis on the new life in Christ which is different from that given by human birth, and also reception 'into the congregation of Christ's flock'. Membership of the Church begins at once.
- b) There may also be a rite of personal response, or initiation into Christian discipleship. This will succeed Baptism – perhaps after an interval of several years, though in the case of those baptised in youth or adulthood it might be part of one ceremony. Its heart will be the acceptance of Christ's call to follow him. It might also include mutual foot-washing. It will mean commitment to a course of training and a rule of life.
- c) In addition a rite of commissioning should be considered for those who wish to share directly in the Church's ministry. This is not the same as Ordination to the ministry of Word and Sacraments, but it would mean dedication to the service of the local church in some specific role or office.
- d) Prior to Baptism there might be some rite for the newborn child, both of thanksgiving and of celebration. This must not be confused with Baptism and may well be most appropriate when parents wish to defer the Sacrament until the child is able to answer for himself. It could cause problems for the parents of handicapped children. But it should be considered whether the Church provides sufficient opportunities to express sheer joy in creation. Perhaps something of this should preface the rite of baptism itself.

## 5. Rites of Renewal

- a) Holy Communion recapitulates the drama of creation and redemption through the work of God in Christ, reconstitutes the crisis of the Church's origins, and seals for us the benefits of the new covenant. It is intended for frequent repetition (many traditions – and the Lima document – say that it should be celebrated at least every Lord's Day) and it should be regarded as the principal and perpetual rite of renewal.
- b) The Covenant Service is designed to take place at the dying of the old year and the birth of the new. It is the annual rite of renewal, emphasising our dedication in response to God's unfailing love and faithfulness.
- c) Special rites need to be devised.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

- 1) **In common with the whole of the Church, Catholic and Reformed, and in faithfulness to our interpretation of the New Testament, the Methodist Church affirms that Baptism in the name of the Trinity is unrepeatable.**

To countenance re-baptism is seriously to undermine that very radical 'once for all' nature of the sacrament which has stimulated the demand for it in later life. Infant baptism, if done with the right intention, forms, words and prayers, can never be invalid. If from the Church's point of view, and from that of serious Christianity, parents have brought their children to the font with little understanding or resolve to implement the vows, those children should not despise the instinctive love, albeit mixed with folk religion, which craved this ceremony for them, and, like Luther, they should find strength and comfort from the knowledge 'I have been baptised'. Christianity is deliverance through a work not our own, something done for us.

Augustine wrote of someone he knew, inclined at first to be sceptical of the relevance of the Church and its ceremonies to Christian faith, but who, in the end, was 'delivered from being ashamed of the Sacraments of the humility of God's word' (**Confessions** viii 2). In baptism, although we are exalted to the heights of Christ's eternal triumph, we also share the humility of him who was himself baptised in a crowd of sinners in Jordan, and in the blood and shame of the cross. And even if it was but a social convention or superstition subscribed to without our knowledge or consent we ought not to deny that it is a means of grace through which God acts.

- (2) **The Methodist Church re-affirms its historic conviction that Infant Baptism is in accord with the Gospel and strongly upholds its validity.**

Infant baptism is a sign of prevenient grace, that 'while we were yet sinners Christ died for us' and that God loves us before ever we know him. He loves the whole of humanity. And he is concerned not only to bring individuals to the knowledge of his truth, but to redeem the race of which they are members and with which they are inextricably bound up. The promise is 'to you and to your children and to all that are afar off'. (Acts 2:39). Infant baptism proclaims that God's mercy is for all, in spite of weakness, helplessness and sin, and that 'as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive' (I Cor. 15:22). Even those who will always remain mentally and physically infants, who will never

be able to make a personal profession of faith are not outside the covenant of Grace.

This does not mean that the present practice of infant baptism is necessarily as it should be. It should be no private ceremony but a great and dramatic act of the Church, an act of renewal for the whole congregation, a means by which its members 'improve' their baptisms. It is no longer practicable to have all baptisms at Easter as in the early Church, but thought should be given to instituting 'baptismal Sundays' like the old Scottish Communion Sundays. This may at first conflict with the 'folk religious' aspect of baptism, which we ought not wholly to disallow because it is of importance for family life which the Church should foster; but the obstacles here will not prove insuperable after a time.

Serious conversations should take place with the parents so that they realise the solemnity of the ordinance for themselves as well as for their child and the responsibility they take upon themselves in making the Baptismal vows. Groups of parents may be brought to Church on several Sunday afternoons in advance of the baptism, for an informal course of instruction over tea. This should be continued afterwards. Cyril of Jerusalem (c.350) reserved his profoundest teaching on baptism until the rite had been experienced. The Church people should be involved in the whole process as well as the minister. The evangelical opportunities at every stage should not be neglected.

As a consequence of so thoroughgoing a policy some parents may withdraw or postpone or refuse baptism for their children. This should be accepted when done out of understanding and conviction, though not actively encouraged. The Conference Memorandum of 1936 declared that 'a solemn obligation to Christ, the Church and the child rests upon parents to present their child to Christ in Baptism' (see above). This should not be forgotten, though we have to recognise a demand for liberty of conscience, more clamant now than then. It may be necessary to find ways of advocating infant baptism which use the language of theological appropriateness and evangelistic opportunity rather than 'obligation'. It should also be borne in mind that many parents are not theologically articulate and may not easily express the deep feelings of their hearts in the language of impeccable doctrinal formulation, or of evangelical experience.

**(3) The Methodist Church recognises that not all Methodists are able to share this conviction and that in such cases it must continue to allow for postponed Baptism**

This may increasingly become the practice in a climate in which conformist Christianity no longer flourishes as once it did. There will be fewer Christian homes and more children may be denied knowledge of Christ until they encounter the Church in their 'teens or later. There may also be more parents who, in spite of the traditional Methodist teaching, feel strongly that baptism must be left until their child comes to understanding and a conscious and decided faith. This would seem also to be a position which can be justified from the New Testament. There must be no suggestion either on one side or the other that the difference is between first and second class Christians. 'Evangelical conversion', a personal sense of God's forgiveness and the wholehearted acceptance of Christ may follow baptism whether infant or believers'. An

increased measure of faith may be granted, and not once nor twice, in after years.

**(4) The possibility of devising new and additional rites should be considered**

(i) There is a Methodist service of **Thanksgiving of parents after the Birth of a Child** comparable to that in the Church of England **Alternative Service Book** (1980) p.213ff. This should be available for use when baptism is deferred; or perhaps used as the first act of the Sacrament itself to stress the joy of God's gift of life.

(ii) A rite to celebrate evangelical conversion or renewal. The Eucharist is, of course, the best and dominical means of this, and Methodists have the Covenant Service, while Confirmation could be the appropriate rite. But we would echo the wish of a recent paper from a working party of Church of England, Methodist, United Reformed and Baptist Union Evangelicals: 'May we all be challenged to think through a ceremony that could truly meet the needs of (those who ask for what may seem in the eyes of the Church to be second baptism) yet respect the theological and liturgical scruples of both infant baptisers and believers' baptisers'.

**This should not include any use of water which might confuse the rite with baptism.** The accompanying Scripture passages and prayers will be all-important. Foot-washing, which J. H. Moulton called 'a neglected sacrament', may be considered; anointing is a possibility; Asperges may not seem quite of the Methodist ethos nor be sufficiently personal for the purpose, though it may be experienced in ecumenical projects.

(iii) Confirmation has a confused history and, in the Church of England, as is noted above, different interpretations. But it has established itself both in Methodism and in ecumenical projects. It is important that it does not 'imperil' Baptism by dividing it 'into two moments of salvation' to quote T. F. Torrance, either by injuring its completeness in its once-for-all character, or by anticipating its fulfilment in the consummated Kingdom. But it may have continuing value as an opportunity for the profession of faith and the invocation of the Holy Spirit at the dawn of adulthood, while it could well be delivered from being a mere social custom and – as sometimes – an end, not of the ceremonies of initiation, but of any Church involvement at all, by being upheld as a service of commissioning for the ministry of the whole people of God.

Two related questions concern admission to Holy Communion and the whole meaning of Church membership. Reports presented to the Conferences of 1973 and 1975 on 'Children and the Sacrament of Holy Communion' did not recommend any constitutional action. The three different points of view examined then still pertain. In our working party, procedures to admit children and to prepare them were described and there was much sympathy for the widely-held conviction that baptised children should not be excluded from the Lord's Table, though it was recognised that they must show some serious desire and be prepared by the minister in conjunction with the appropriate youth leaders and with the consent of the parents concerned. Nor must the Eucharist be in danger of being 'put away' with childish things. As the previous report stated, much here must be left to the discretion of ministers, parents, children and local churches. What we would emphasise is that Baptism is the one essential rite for entry into the Church and those who have received it are

entitled to their place at the Lord's Table, though it may be expedient for this to be delayed. We would not advocate communicating babes in arms as in the Orthodox Churches.

**(5) There must be a sensitive regard to the position of Ministers**

The re-affirmation of both infant baptism and that of those able to answer for themselves may strain the consciences of some ministers. It has been suggested that the solution of the problem in the United Reformed Church furnishes a precedent, but the parallel is far from exact since there the problem arose from the merger of two denominations, and in any case the Churches do not form a connexion. A dual system would seem to be a pre-requisite in many ecumenical projects and in the 'coming great Church' to which we look, but it is hard to see any place in the Methodist ministry for one unable to baptise infants. It needs to be ascertained at candidature whether a person is willing to accept the affirmations of this report, just as it should be ensured that if a male, he agrees with the Methodist Church on the ordination of women to the full ministry of Word and Sacraments.

Even so, consciences may become inflamed as ministry is exercised and convictions may change. This has already happened with painful consequences, though it must be admitted that discontent with baptismal policy has sometimes been symptomatic of an individual dis-ease with Methodist doctrine and practice as a whole.

In such cases the matter should be regarded in the first instance as one of pastoral concern. We recommend for this purpose the formation of a pastoral committee by the Chairman of the District, if the need arises. But where convictions have become irrevocably Baptist rather than Methodist, everything should be done to ease the transfer of such a minister with understanding and goodwill as appropriate to a pastoral rather than a disciplinary matter. Discipline would thus only need to be involved if and when all these approaches had been explored without success.

No less sensitivity is needed within the Church with regard to the convictions of two other groups of ministers – those whose practice is sometimes stigmatised as either 'rigorist' or 'indiscriminate'. The so-called 'rigorists' emphasise the responsibilities imposed by baptism on those to be baptised or the parents of infant candidates, and are concerned lest the Church implicate itself, parents presenting children, or candidates in hypocrisy. The so-called 'indiscriminators' regard the gift made in baptism as primarily unconditional, and the associated promises at present usual in our practice as secondary, and believe that our Arminian theology commits us to seeing all humanity as heirs of the salvation brought by Christ, the new Adam. Both schools of thought are concerned about the place of baptism in our missionary strategy. The 'rigorists' perceive the dangers attending the reduction of baptism to the level of 'folk religion'. The 'indiscriminators' are more hopeful about the role of 'folk religion' and 'conventional Christianity' in God's plan of salvation; they believe that even the residual Christianity left now in British social custom can be a foothold for the Gospel, and they fear that every refusal to baptise marks a further de-Christianisation of British society. Both groups of ministers are aware of the possibility that the Holy Spirit can, after years of neglect, revive spiritual life, and restore the meaning and value of baptism.

To the question of **emergency baptisms**, which has recently, as so often before, exercised the consciences of ministers and members of our Church, we must reiterate our Church's previous judgement (e.g. Methodist Conference 1959, Representative Session Agenda, p.241) that a person (of any age) validly baptised, even with the minimum conditions, may not be baptised again. It is possible and much to be commended, that the 'omitted ceremonies' be supplied, if the candidate lives on, in a public service, 'presenting the child to the congregation and including the vows which form part of the Baptismal Service', should be held.

The minimum conditions are ecumenically agreed to be these: that water be applied to the candidate (by pouring, dipping or sprinkling), by any person acting with the intention of doing what Christ willed or what Christians do, and saying 'I baptise you' (or, 'N, the servant of God is baptised') 'in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' (in whatever language the person baptising understands).

Our Church has a responsibility to reassure families and medical personnel that the omission of baptism does not, in our judgement, prejudice a baby's relationship to God; but it is equally important for pastoral reasons to understand the need that (e.g.) some hospital staffs feel to be sure that they have discharged their responsibility for the whole welfare of each patient, and that in their concern for their patients they may be acting, no less truly than a congregation or a family, as a community of faith.

## Epilogue

'The efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered'.

So the Westminster Confession, on which Donald Baillie commented 'The point is that a person's baptism should be to him a means of grace, not merely at that moment but ever afterwards; and the faith which appropriates the grace offered in the sacrament includes the faith by which all his life long he looks back to his baptism'. (**The Theology of the Sacraments** p.88).

Bernard Holland, in the Fernley-Hartley lecture for 1970, urged a similar lesson on Methodism, which he complained, had sadly ignored it.

'Baptism, with its message of our call to be children of God, and of his unending love, can speak to us in all conditions of the soul, through every ordinance of the Church, and throughout life. It has a word to say to us when in sin we run away from God, when in conversion we turn back to him, and when in despondency and grief we lose faith in him. Nor are its implications ever exhausted . . . until it has spoken its last and most gracious word of re-assurance at the hour of our death'. (**Baptism in Early Methodism** p.150).

Baptism commits the Christian to a discipline of prayer, of fidelity to the other means of grace, especially worship in the congregation, and association with God's people for mutual support and growth in understanding, and for corporate action in the world to relieve distress and to offer Christ in manifold ways. To regard all this as the extension of baptism roots all our Christian lives in the finished work of Christ. It reminds us that we are no longer our own, but, as the Heidelberg

Catechism has it, 'with body and soul both in life and in death' belong to our 'faithful Saviour Jesus Christ', and even as in the Holy Eucharist we are brought to a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, so in the end we shall be led to its consummation in eternal joy. But at the moment of baptism, whenever we receive it, we are all infants in Christ, and the baptismal life means growth until we come personally and in the fellowship of believers to the measure of the stature of his fullness. Nor should the other drastic image of the New Testament be forgotten that we are baptised into Christ's **death**; through that alone does our new birth come. And our baptism, which does not celebrate our human life but our regeneration, is into the whole Christ, incarnate, ministering, crucified, risen, ascended and to come. Into what then are we initiated in baptism? Into Christ and the new life which he came to bring, which is expressed by membership of the Church which is his Body, sometimes in homely, inconspicuous ways of caring and of friendship, 'nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love', often, by work for a better social order and a refusal to acquiesce in any compromise with evil or admission that it will prevail. The baptised carry on Christ's victory, witness in life and death to the triumph of his Cross, know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, and work and pray for the acknowledgement of his rule in all the earth. But the baptismal life extends beyond time and this world altogether. It makes us 'very members incorporate in the mystical body' of God's Son and gives us part in 'the hidden yet real life of . . . the day without evening of the Kingdom'. (Alexander Schmemmann, **Of Water and the Spirit** (SPCK 1974) p.154).

## **CHRISTIAN INITIATION: RESPONSE TO THE CONNEXIONAL DISCUSSION**

We were very grateful indeed for all the letters received and especially for reports on Circuit and District consultations. Though there have been more than thirty documents sent to the convener of the original Working Party, it is not possible to generalise as to how the Report has been received by the Connexion as a whole. The responses have come, understandably, from those who feel most deeply about the issues involved. The majority of these are critical of the Report's conclusions and recommendations, though not unanimously so. There is no doubt that very many people in the Connexion are content with the Report as it stands – it may well represent the majority view but those who feel it inadequate either to their theology or their pastoral problems are too numerous to be ignored. We are grateful to those who have studied the Report so carefully, though one or two correspondents do not seem to have read it. In this reply, we do not propose to deal with questions of biblical exegesis or church history or the body of the Report, but to concentrate on some revision of the final section. The main points for consideration are these:

### **1. BAPTISM OF INFANTS**

The problem of 'indiscriminate' baptism (so-called by some) divides the paedobaptists; some regard it as an 'obscurity', and several attack the doctrine of prevenient grace. Others take the Maurician view that Calvary is the world's baptism and all are its beneficiaries, and it must not be withheld from those who seek it, however inarticulate, folk-religionist or superstitious they are. Some call for a revision of the service of infant baptism so that promises are not required of parents who are not in a position to keep them.

It is clear that the Connexion is divided on this issue, and the Report as it stands accurately reflects the divergent opinions. The matter must be left to the individual consciences of ministers and of the churches.

But we would call attention to what is said in the Report about the need for most serious conversations with parents – and sponsors – before baptism is administered. There may be limits to their ability to grasp some of the issues involved. They may be moved by instinct to do what is best for the child than by understanding the full meaning of baptism or the obligations of Church membership, but teaching about the responsibility involved in the promises – if they are to make them – must not be minimised. Some revision of the 1975 rite of Infant Baptism – or alternative to it – seems called for to meet the complex pastoral situations. Such a Service might give clearer expression to the Theology of Grace.

## **2. A DUALITY OF PRACTICE**

The Report is charged by many people with being rigid and legalistic, and there is once more the expression of the desire to allow believer's baptism even if the candidates have been baptised in infancy. Why cannot there be two baptisms of different kinds? Should not the decision about baptism as a seal of renewal, even by those who have been baptised in infancy, be left to local churches and circuits? Must we put out Ministers and Members who want to remain Methodists but who cannot believe infant baptism is either scriptural or adequate to the Church's mission?

We wish to reaffirm the validity and sufficiency of infant baptism. We agree that scriptural warrant for the unrepeatability of baptism is not best vouched for by Ephesians 4:5, which probably refers to the one Catholic baptism over against that of rival Christian sects, but that the New Testament could not countenance anything which seemed to be a repetition of baptism in the name of Jesus is, we believe, beyond dispute.

- (a) The metaphors used of birth and death (John 3 and Romans 6) surely mean that baptism is once for all.
- (b) Baptism is the sacrament of the finished work of Christ, and just as he died once for all, so are we incorporated into him (Hebrew 10:12). Romans 6 (1-11), in which Paul declares that we are baptised into Christ's death, reaches its climax in what is surely the clinching NT statement on this matter.

We know that Christ, once raised from the dead is never to die again; he is no longer under the dominion of death. For in dying, he died to sin, once for all, and in living as he lives he lives to God.

- (c) In Acts 8, the Samaritans who have been baptised in the name of Jesus but have not received the Holy Spirit, are not baptised again – there is no suggestion that their baptism has been invalid – they are given the apostolic empowering by the laying on of hands. In recalling the New Testament evidence on these and other issues we should not forget the danger of tying the experience of grace too closely to any particular ritual moment.

Anabaptists, like all orthodox Christians, insist that there can be no repetition of Baptism. Of course, as the Report recognises, the demand is not for re-baptism but

for real baptism – and there are some baptised on profession of faith, who entering upon an experience of renewal, regard what happened, perhaps in their teens, as a formality and wish for what they regard as NT Baptism to be the seal of their deepened commitment and sign of the Spirit's renewal which they have recently received.

It is not only infant baptism which may in retrospect be thought not to be 'the real thing'. And there are instances of demand for this, leading to a desire for yet further water ceremonies to acquire true baptism. We must therefore reaffirm that if water is administered in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, this is Baptism and unrepeatable.

### **3. THE NEED FOR NEW AND ADDITIONAL RITES**

We have already suggested that the 1975 Service of Infant Baptism calls for revision, and in the Report itself that there should be a service of Thanksgiving for those parents who wish to postpone Baptism until their Children are able and willing to answer for themselves. What we now propose in addition is a rite of renewal which will satisfy the undoubted need of those who wish publicly to celebrate their life in the Spirit and which will dramatically remind them of what Baptism means even if they – either as infants or adults – were not fully aware of it at the time.

### **4. A RITE OF CELEBRATION OF NEW LIFE IN THE SPIRIT**

This would not be baptism. But we have come to feel strongly that water must be included and indeed an act of immersion (even though the evidence implies that this was not, as is popularly supposed, the invariable practice in the NT and the early church). We feel that we must learn to live with the risk of confusion for the sake of reconciling those who have such strong convictions about the need for a dramatic rite with water, while at the same time the Church must affirm that baptism is valid even if it is not attended by the fulness of conscious faith, and that it cannot be repeated. A certain ambiguity surrounds all rites. They mean different things to different people, as do verbal formulae. What should remove, for the discerning, any trace of ambiguity, is that what characterises a rite of the Church is the content of the prayer which accompanies the outward sign. The laying on of hands can be used for confirmation, for ordination, for healing, for blessing. What distinguishes these various acts is the accompanying prayer. And so it will be with the use of water in the Rite of Celebration.

The prayer as well as the preliminary statements will make clear that it is not baptism.

Needless to say, this rite will be optional for those who feel they need it to seal their response to their renewed sense of God's salvation. But thanksgiving will be paramount.

### **5. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- (1) A revision of the 1975 rite of Infant Baptism.
- (2) The preparation of a Service of Thanksgiving for the birth or after the adoption of a child, without baptism.

- (3) A rite for the celebration of new life in the Spirit including the use of water but making it clear by the words used and the prayers offered that this would be neither Baptism nor Rebaptism.
- (4) That consideration should be given to a new rite of Confirmation which would by its nature be much more an act of positive commissioning.

The whole question of the relation of the rites of Christian faith to those 'of passage' which celebrate stages of human growth needs to be a subject of long term study.

We hope and pray that this report will provoke continued study of Christian Initiation in the Church as we seek to hear the voice of the Spirit both in the great traditions and in our own time.

We must emphasise that Church Membership begins at Baptism whatever the age of administration. Another ceremony will be needed at the time when personal commitment is made and the baptised are of an age to undertake definite responsibilities and offices in the Christian community; but Baptism is the sufficient act of Christian Initiation and signifies, along with its other meanings, entry into membership of the Church Universal.

## **6. THE POSITION OF MINISTERS**

The position of Ministers who in the course of their ministries become convinced that they cannot conscientiously administer the Sacrament of Baptism to infants is peculiarly difficult under the Methodist Connexional and Circuit system. The Faith and Order Committee does not feel that it can at this stage offer fresh guidance on this problem. The majority of its members would not wish to proceed beyond the recommendations of the Report of 1975. Further discussion and developments must depend on further initiatives of the Conference.

## **RESOLUTIONS**

That the Conference adopts the Response to the Connexional Discussion of the 1985 Report on Christian Initiation.

That the Conference adopts the amended Report on Christian Initiation.

*(Agenda 1987, pp. 602-646)*

---

The Conference adopted the first resolution, adding:

'on the understanding that the references to baptism as conferring membership of the church are to be understood in their context as referring to reception into the congregation of Christ's flock (p. 636) and of entry into the Church Universal (p. 646) and not as departing from or modifying the basis of membership of the Methodist Church as governed by clause 33 of the Deed of Union, nor as prejudicing consideration of the report 'Church Membership and Christian Nurture'.'

The Conference deleted from the RECOMMENDATIONS, page 646 (3), in line 2, 'including the use of water'.

The relevant paragraphs can be found on p. 91 (4a), p. 100 (last paragraph) and p. 99 (recommendation 3) in the present volume.

The Conference adopted the second resolution on the same understanding as to membership as in the case of the first resolution.

The Conference also directed the Faith and Order Committee to consider whether ministers may be in full connexion with the Conference provided they do not dispute the principle of infant baptism and are willing to commend those who seek baptism for their children to ministers who practice infant baptism, and to present a report to the next Conference.