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# Christian Initiation

## Baptist Faith and Practice

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Initiation is not essentially a Christian category of thought and expression, but rather owes its origin to the Greek Mysteries where the rites of initiation were associated with sacramental magic. The doctrine of initiation of any confession or denomination must necessarily be determined by the connotation ascribed to the term. If by initiation we mean the initial act or rite of introduction of an individual to the Christian Fellowship there need not be anything particularly sacramental about it. But if on the other hand initiation stands for the acceptance of a person as a full-fledged member of the Christian Church on the ground of his adherence to the Christian faith and his express wish to identify himself with the Christians, then the rites of initiation which mark this transition to a new sphere and new way of life are of tremendous significance both for the individual and the Church. In this article which seeks to present the Baptist faith and practice, initiation is understood as a responsible undertaking under God of both the individual and the church concerned. When does a person become a Christian, and when is he recognized as such by the Church?

In setting forth the Baptist doctrine of initiation it may be customary to begin with the adult believer or inquirer seeking baptism. But this does not represent the actual practice in a large number of churches both in Great Britain and on the mission field, and tends to obscure the full significance of initiation as Baptists understand it. I shall have in mind particularly the situation as it obtains in Ceylon, and it may be safely assumed that diversity of practice is no indication of diversity of doctrine.

Initiation in Baptist doctrine and practice is not confined to one single event however significant the event may be. It is rather a process culminating in the two great Sacraments of the Church, viz. Baptism and the Lord's Supper. In Ceylon for people of Christian parents the beginning of initiation may be traced in customs that are observed not long after the child is born. It is not unusual for the minister to visit the expectant mother in hospital or nursing home (where nearly every child is born nowadays) to prepare her mentally and spiritually to wait peacefully upon God for the supreme gift of a new life. Before the mother and the child leave hospital the minister is expected to visit them again to offer prayers of thanksgiving and intercession. At this very early stage therefore in the life of the child, the parents and the minister representing the church pray that the child shall be brought within the sphere of divine grace.

The second landmark in the process of initiation is what is described as the Service of Dedication. A month or so later the parents bring

their child to the church and during the act of public worship on Sunday the congregation welcomes the child and offers praises to God. The church prays for God's blessings on the child, and the parents that they shall be endowed with God's grace to fulfil their responsibility as Christian parents. The church in turn is reminded of its responsibility that the life of the fellowship should be such as never to be a stumbling block to the growing child, and that the Christian upbringing of the child should be a co-operative adventure of the church and the parents. The minister finally takes the child in his arms and prays 'The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon you and give you peace.' The service of Dedication is most beautiful because it is the expression of the most natural response of parents to God in their joyful experience of being blessed and entrusted with the sacred trust of the gift of a child. Principal R. L. Child of Regent's Park College, Oxford, has very aptly described Dedication as 'the blessing of children and the dedication of parents'. Such a description brings out clearly the spiritual values Baptists wish to conserve in this rite.

The theological basis of such a Service of Dedication may seem contrary to the traditional Baptist view that a person must become a Christian, a Baptist, purely through personal choice. It is obviously true that this Service expresses the desire of the parents and the church that the child should become a Christian when he comes to the age of discretion. The child is brought up under all the Christian influences available, the Baptist church, Sunday school, and within the love and care of the Christian Fellowship. All these influences are believed to be means of God's grace to lead the child to understand His love and the truth revealed in Jesus Christ. But at no point is there in the life of the child any kind of coercion, and the fellowship of non-Baptists is not forbidden. Thus ultimately the individual is responsible for his decision to identify himself with the Baptists to live his Christian life of worship and witness in fellowship with them.

Two questions arise out of this presentation of the Service of Dedication, viz. what is the part that God is believed to play, and secondly, what is the status of the children of Baptist parents? We believe that there is no point or stage in human experience where God is not at work, whether such activity is consciously recognized or not. We believe that God accepts the praise of His people, and answers their prayers for Divine grace. The Service is a means of joy and blessing to the parents who acknowledge publicly that God is the giver of all good gifts. Baptists eschew any idea which suggests that anything miraculously happens to the child at this Service. The child is not engrafted into the membership of the Body of Christ in virtue of this rite, but he is brought within the love and care of the Fellowship, and as such he is entitled to its ministrations. According to the Baptist doctrine of the Church the infant cannot automatically be made a member of the Church. It is true, however, that the child regards himself as a Christian, and so is he regarded by his parents, society and the government for all practical purposes. The Theology of the Baptist position makes it impossible to regard the child as a Christian in the full sense of the term. In the life of the child the process of initiation has begun, and it is the prayer of the parents and the Church that he would grow up to

a personal recognition of the claims of Christ and so accept Him as his Saviour and Lord.

### Baptism

The Sacrament of believers' baptism is the climax of the process of initiation. The Baptist doctrine of baptism and the practice of it is based fundamentally on an understanding of the New Testament and God's revelation as a personal encounter between God and man. Truth in the Bible, says Professor Emil Brunner, is always presented as something dynamic and personal. It is God's revelation of Himself and man's response to Him. God in Jesus Christ has not only revealed Himself as the God of love and grace, but He has brought to fulfilment His redemptive work. Christus Victor has gone the way of suffering and death on the cross. The darkest hour of human history is in God's infinite mercy the brightest hour, for it is the hour of redemption and hope. We agree with Professor Oscar Cullmann that Christ accomplished the great redemption, the once for all work of salvation, without the co-operation, and in spite of man, and in absolute independence of man's response of faith. But it is difficult to see the logic of his argument when he goes on to affirm that salvation becomes effective in man or rather is offered to man in entire independence of the decision of faith and understanding of those who benefit from it. The Baptist doctrine is that God's gift of forgiveness and the elevation of the repentant sinner to the status of a child of God, are miracles of God's grace offered freely to man which man can either accept or reject. The work of Christ becomes a reality in the experience of the believer as he consciously, deliberately and penitently opens his heart to the inflow of God's grace. None other could do this for him.

This marks the first stage which leads to believers' baptism. The person who has made this personal decision to follow Christ as Saviour and Lord in virtue of the apprehension of the Christian Gospel, is recognized as fulfilling the essential requirement for baptism. For some people this phase does not involve any radical change of belief such as occurs in the case of a person coming to Christianity from a non-Christian religion or from a life of secularism and flagrant sin. For those brought up in Christian homes and under the influence of the church the final self committal may be a natural process unaccompanied by anything spectacular or dramatic. In the final analysis Baptists do not make an absolute distinction between such a person and a non-Christian seeking baptism. The one has had the advantage of Christian influence and instruction in the faith, while the other comes from an entirely non-Christian environment. In the case of the latter the acceptance of Christ would involve a complete uprooting of himself morally and spiritually as he discovers that Christ makes all things new for him. The orientation and adjustments demanded of him will be a test of the sincerity of his profession. In the experience of both there is the initial awakening of human personality to the presence and the power of the divine and the subsequent self-abandonment to the working of the Holy Spirit in their life. It is imperative that this should be their personal individual experience in virtue of which they know in the depths of their own hearts that henceforth they are Christians, before others could so describe them with any justification.

On the request of such inquirers the Church addresses herself to the task of instructing them in the fundamentals of the Christian Faith, the meaning and significance of baptism and church membership. There is no prescribed or stereotyped course of instruction intended to be followed in all churches. The candidates are led to a deeper understanding of the Christian Gospel and to a realization of the implications of what it means to be a Christian. On the recommendation of the minister the church formally accepts the candidates as being ready for baptism. It is not unusual for the church to appoint two deacons to interview the candidates. The Sacrament of believers' baptism is administered during the worship on Sunday or at a Service specially arranged for the purpose. The candidate is baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost on the profession of faith.

The question may be asked as to what constitutes the essence of baptism, and what is believed to happen as the candidate is immersed in the waters of baptism. It is true that moral and spiritual qualities observed in the candidate are not recognized in themselves as a sufficient qualification for church membership unless he takes the decisive step, baptism. Baptism, then in its essential nature is the symbolic representation of the inward spiritual experience, and the public testimony of a person that he has voluntarily, and on his own conviction and responsibility pledged himself unequivocally to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. The believer in faith identifies himself with Christ on the cross, and as Christ died and rose again so the believer's death to sin and resurrection to newness of life is set forth in the full symbolism of immersion and the coming out of the waters of baptism. Faith is not subsequent to baptism as suggested by Oscar Cullmann, but faith which is man's response to God's saving grace is antecedent to and contemporaneous with baptism. This understanding of baptism rules out all ideas of sacramental magic and the magical potency of water as it was held by Tertullian.

It may seem that this description of the Baptist position suggests that the most significant act of initiation is something entirely human, something done by man for man. While it must be affirmed without compromise that man is not the passive object for whom God does something, it must be stated that it is God's redemptive activity in Jesus Christ, and the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit which gives meaning to the Sacrament. We believe that God is present at Baptism to receive the worship of His people, to accept and ratify the pledge of the believer and endow him with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The work of the Holy Spirit is the most staggering reality in the experience of the believer. As he looks back on his life he can now discern the Spirit's activity in every Christian influence which guided him to the moment of his baptism. He goes forth into the world in the strength and power of the Holy Spirit rejoicing in the assurance that God has received him into His fold.

The Church participating in the Sacrament has the central core of the Gospel enacted before them in the comprehensive symbolism of immersion. The Church in this Sacrament proclaims the death and resurrection (the *Kerygma*) of our Lord. This is the confessional value of believers' baptism.

The baptized believer now joins the congregation in the Service of the Lord's Supper. The believer in faith accepts the self oblation of Christ symbolized in the broken bread and the poured out wine as the efficient cause of his salvation, and by faith receives Christ into his heart.

The minister on behalf of the Church gives the right hand of fellowship and welcomes him into the Church. It is the more generally accepted view that acceptance of Christ also involves the acceptance of the fellowship of His people, and to be accepted by Christ, the Head, entails the acceptance by the Body, the Church. Baptism therefore is baptism into Christ and into His Church. It must be noted that there is nothing in Baptist polity to prevent a baptized believer seeking membership in a church of any other persuasion. Initiation is now complete, and the believer begins his active life of worship and witness as a responsible member of the Church.

This discussion is incomplete without reference being made to the Baptist position regarding those who have been initiated into the membership of non-Baptist churches by infant baptism but now seek membership in the Baptist Fellowship. The question of rebaptism is one that presents serious difficulty in present-day negotiations for church union. Looking at the problem independently of the issues of theological debate it can be affirmed categorically that Baptists believe in One Lord, One Faith and One Baptism. They take their stand on Scriptural basis and authority in their understanding and interpretation of the doctrine of Baptism. Baptists find it extremely difficult to subscribe to the view that the theological content and connotation envisaged by infant baptism is identical with the doctrine of baptism as set out in this paper. The problem is not solved by asserting that it is a matter of indifference whether one is baptized early or late into the death of Christ once and for all accomplished ; nor is the mode of baptism the differentia. Therefore theological consistency, intellectual honesty and integrity of conscience demand that they can accept no other baptism. It is exceedingly gratifying to realize that, when baptism is occupying the central place in theological discussion, some of the most eminent theologians of the day are in complete agreement with the fundamental position of Baptists. While scholars like Professor Oscar Cullmann attempt with great confidence to defend and uphold infant baptism, both Professor Karl Barth and Professor Emil Brunner have launched a vigorous and trenchant attack on it as theologically unsound and Scripturally unwarranted. Karl Barth says that 'the baptismal practice found in use on the basis of the teaching prevalent today is arbitrary and despotic'. Emil Brunner says that 'the contemporary practice of infant baptism can hardly be regarded as being short of scandalous'. I refer to these two theologians primarily because they are making explicit to the world with thoroughness of scholarship and soundness of New Testament exegesis some of the spiritual values and insights conserved in the Baptist tradition.

The modern theological scene is marked by a healthy disturbance of conscience and an uneasiness of mind. Some of the traditional assumptions of the Church and the theological basis of some of the rites of the Church are being questioned with a view to a right discernment of the will of God for His people as a worshipping and witnessing community.