

A Functional Analysis of Baptism: Implications For Infant Baptism

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THERE can be no question about the fact that baptism was practiced during the early years of the Christian Era. However, there has been a long-standing debate among theologians and biblical scholars concerning the practice of baptizing infants. A growing dissatisfaction with the practice of infant baptism would seem to be indicated by the increasing number of questions which have been raised in recent years, both by clergymen and laymen.

The number and content of articles in popular religious journals is testimony to the fact that a significant number of clergymen have serious reservations about baptizing infants. It is also frequently reported that more and more discerning laymen are seeking meaningful answers to the question, "Why baptize infants?" Perhaps a good indication of such questioning is to be found in the notable decrease in the number of infants baptized in recent years. It may well be that a significant number of parents choose to register this question simply by not presenting their children for Christian baptism.

Let us seek an answer to this question through an examination of baptism from a functional point of view. Such an analysis in no way diminishes the importance of a more deeply theological understanding of baptism, but it may serve to point out the reason why infant baptism in particular is becoming less and less popular in our time.

If it can be demonstrated that the theological presuppositions which have traditionally been used to support Christian baptism are not compatible

with the practice of baptizing infants, then infant baptism must be justified on other grounds. Furthermore, if it can be demonstrated that varying functions are served in the baptism of adults and infants, then a question must be raised concerning the assumption that both acts are of the same sacramental character.

The method used will be the examination of baptism in (1) the New Testament, (2) the documents of the early church, and (3) the theological statements of selected modern theologians. In each case we shall ask the question, "What specific functions are served when an individual is baptized into the Christian faith?" A second question implicit in the analysis will be, "What differences of function may be determined in the cases of adult and infant baptism?"

THE FUNCTION OF BAPTISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Even the most cursory examination of the references to baptism in the New Testament will reveal a rather consistent pattern of thought concerning its function in the Christian community. At the expense of repetition, let us examine several passages which either state or imply a functional definition of baptism.

And they were baptized by him (John) in the river Jordan, **confessing their sins.** (Matthew 3.6)¹
"I baptize you with water for repentance . . ." (Matthew 3.11)
... and he (John) went into all the region about Jordan preaching a **baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.** (Luke 3.3)

¹ All quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Italics supplied to emphasize the implicit functional definitions.

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And Peter said to them, **"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."** (Acts 2.38a)

So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (Acts 2.41)

... when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, **they were baptized,** both men and women, even Simon himself believed and after being baptized he continued with Philip. (Acts 18.12-13a)

"And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins calling on his name." (Acts 22.16)

Baptism, which corresponds to this, save you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as **an appeal to God for a clear conscience,** through the resurrection of Jesus Christ . . . (I Peter 3.21)

These and other New Testament references would seem to make it clear that baptism was conditional upon (1) the hearing of the Word, (2) confession of sin, (3) an attitude of repentance, and (4) a desire for forgiveness. In other words those who were baptized received their baptism with "eyes wide open," having first received the gospel and then in faithful response to it, repented of their sins, and sought the forgiveness of God.

Paul's use of the rather sophisticated "death and resurrection" theme in his discussion of baptism in Romans is further evidence that the function of baptism had to do with a conscious transformation of one's life. Baptism for Paul is tangible expression of his "death and resurrection" theme, clearly a symbol meaningful only to those who are mature in their understanding of the Christian faith.

Some scholars have argued that an exception to this pattern of "believer's baptism" is to be found in those passages where reference is supposedly made to the baptism of entire families.² However, no firm case for infant baptism can be based upon these passages,

since the very same references contain stated or implied functional definitions of baptism which presuppose belief, conversion, or other mature responses on the part of those being baptized. The "household" (OIKOS) argument thus becomes an even stronger point in favor of believer's baptism, especially in view of the presence of an early manuscript of Acts (16.19ff) of a reference which identifies the Philippian jailer as Stephanus, members of whose household are reported to have been among the first "converts" in Achaia. (I Cor. 16.15)³

THE FUNCTION OF BAPTISM IN THE DOCUMENTS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Let us now turn to an examination of some of the rituals, instructions, and prayers of the early church in an attempt to discover what functions were ascribed to baptism by those who practiced it during the first few centuries of the Christian Era.

One of the earliest baptismal rituals is found in the "Apostolic Tradition" composed by Hippolytus early in the third century. Hippolytus describes for us the ritual by which the candidates assembled by running water at sunrise. One by one the candidates are taken aside by the priest for the purpose of "renouncing Satan." Following this abjuration on the part of each candidate, the actual baptism occurs. Each candidate goes down into the water three times according to the trinitarian formula. Following immersion, the newly baptized are anointed with oil, after which the entire party moves into the church where the baptized are again anointed with oil and given the kiss of peace by the bishop.⁴

Describing the practice of baptism at Rome, Hippolytus details an elaborate ritual, the preparation for which is to

³ *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9, p. 223.

⁴ A. Hamman, O.F.M., *Early Christian Prayers*, London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd., 1961, p. 92ff.

² Acts 16.15, 30-33, 18.8.

take place over a period of three years. Such preparation is to include "instruction, prayers, and exorcisms."⁵

The rite of baptism as described for us by Hippolytus may have had some magical connotations insofar as evil is understood to be the work of a personified Satan who is renounced during the ceremony. However, it is a reasonable assumption that the primary function of baptism according to Hippolytus was that of a symbol proclaiming the transformation of the individual.

Other church fathers held similar views concerning the function of baptism. Justin refers to the candidates for baptism as those who are "persuaded and believe that what we teach and say is true, and undertake to be able to live accordingly, and are instructed to pray and entreat God with fasting."⁶

The *Didache* assumes that baptism was a means by which a convert was initiated into the church. As such the rite was preceded by a period of instruction and fasting. Thus the function of baptism has to do with the mature adult who has been "transformed," undergoes a period of instruction, and also undertakes a discipline of fasting.⁷

A third century document, Tertullian's *De Baptismo*, relates that the candidates for baptism were to prepare themselves, "with repeated prayers, fasts, and bendings of the knee and vigils all the night through."⁸ Again there can be no question about the fact that such instructions were intended for adults.

While a number of functional definitions are to be found among the documents of the early years of the Christian Era which presuppose "believer's baptism," it would not be fair to conclude that the baptism of infants was not practiced during those years. On the contrary there is good evidence

that infants were baptized at these early dates. The important point for the present analysis is that the baptism of infants by the early church, whether or not it was widespread, must have been practiced for reasons *other* than those which are to be found in the statements about baptism which issue from the period.

If the practice of infant baptism was widespread during the first three centuries, which seems rather unlikely from the available evidence, it might well be a result of the eschatological character of early Christian theology. It is certainly plausible, given the expectation of an early parousia, that infants would be baptized. This explanation is strengthened by the presence of the "cleansing" and "saving" qualities which were attributed to baptism by the early rituals.

THE FUNCTION OF BAPTISM IN THE MODERN CHURCH

A similar conflict between the professed theological function of baptism, which would limit its practice to the mature adult believer, and the practice of baptizing infants may be observed when we examine the statements of modern theologians. For the sake of brevity, let us examine three theologians whose thinking is in many ways characteristic of contemporary thought concerning baptism.

John Wesley in his theological definition of baptism very clearly implies a function which limits its practice to the responsible and "responding" adult. Nevertheless, he also advocates infant baptism! It must be said to his credit that he recognizes the conflict and attempts, however unsuccessfully, to deal with it.

Baptism is not the new birth; they are not one and the same thing . . . from the preceding reflections we may . . . observe that as the new birth is not the same thing with baptism, so it does not always accompany baptism; they do not constantly go together. A man may possibly be "born of water" and yet not be "born

⁵ J. G. Davies, *The Early Christian Church*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965, p. 148.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

of the spirit." There may sometimes be the outward sign, where there is not the inward grace. I do not now speak with regard to infants; it is certain our church supposes that all who are baptized 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 assumption.⁹

In its dual rituals for the baptism of infants and adults, the Methodist Church reflects Wesley's inconsistency as well as that of the early Church Fathers. In the ritual adopted by the General Conference of 1964, the "Order for the Administration of the Sacrament of Baptism for Children" refers to baptism as an "outward and visible sign of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ . . ." However, in the order to be used for the baptism of youth and adults, those being baptized are called upon to be repentant, seeking the forgiveness of God.¹⁰

Karl Barth seems to have the same difficulty, even though he is not an advocate of infant baptism. His understanding of the theology of baptism is faithful to the New Testament and the early church when he says:

Baptism without the willingness and readiness of the baptized is true, effectual and effective baptism, but it is not correct; it is not done in obedience, it is not administered according to the proper order, and therefore, it is necessarily clouded baptism.¹¹

The argument that baptism without faith is "effective" has been used by other theologians to justify the baptism of infants. However, such an argument, whether used to justify infant baptism, or as in this case of Barth's justifying the baptism of an adult who may be unwilling and unready, poses an addi-

tional problem of what would appear to be a magical interpretation of the act.

Another contemporary scholar, Martin Marty, reflects John Wesley's difficulty of presupposing the necessity of a faithful response on the part of the baptized, yet maintaining the validity of infant baptism.

Baptism works the forgiveness of sins.¹²

It is not that God has to use this particular means because he is too limited to devise any other; he does it because it is the way to get across to men the fact of His cleansing . . .¹³

Marty speaks also of the necessity of a church architecture which provides a meaningful place for the rite of baptism. His concern is that more of the "cleansing, initiatory, death-and-resurrection symbolism can be made apparent."¹⁴

Throughout his writing Marty implies a functional definition of baptism which would seem to assume a faithful response on the part of the baptized. Yet, he also affirms the validity of infant baptism, apparently without being aware of the contradiction.

CONCLUSION

It is not my purpose to argue against a liturgical observance which marks the birth of a child in the Christian community. The purpose rather is to argue that a meaningful distinction ought to be drawn between such a function and that of Christian baptism, which ought to be reserved for that occasion which symbolizes the commitment of an adult to the Christian community.

It is inconsistent theologically and otherwise to insist that the baptism of adults and infants be given the same significance or that they be understood as having a common function. Baptism as it is defined in the New Testament, by the church Fathers, and also by

⁹ Sermon, "The New Birth," *Forty-Four Sermons*. London: Epworth Press, Edition of 1964, p. 522f.

¹⁰ *The Book of Worship for Church and Home*, Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1964, p. 7ff.

¹¹ Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, trans. E. Payne, London: S.C.M. Press, 1945, p. 41.

¹² Martin Marty, *Baptism*. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962, p. 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

modern theologians depends upon such symbols as cleansing, initiation, commission, consecration, repentance, and dedication. It seems to be universally accepted that these symbols are meaningful and useful tools for use on the part of those who enter the Christian community through the sacrament of baptism. Each of these symbols depends upon the acceptance of responsibility on the part of the baptized and each assumes a mature relationship between the baptized and God or at least between the baptized and the community of the faithful.

It is inconceivable that this can be accomplished for the infant child, whether by baptism with water or any other means. We must accept the fact that the "good news" is an expression of God's acceptance of individuals and calls for a recognition and response on the part of the individual. Such a recognition and response is not possible for an infant. Therefore any act or ritual which is performed for the "benefit" of the infant, however meaningful it may be to the rest of the community, ought not to be called by the name of Christian baptism.

There have been many attempts in recent years to develop a meaningful and symbolic liturgical order for use on the occasion of the birth of a child in the Christian community. Hopefully such attempts will continue and result in a valid liturgical distinction between the birth of a child and the uniting of an adult with the community through the historic symbol of baptism. Such a new order ought to include emphasis upon the dedication of the child's parents' the responsibility of the community, and a reaffirmation of the "good news" appropriate to the occasion.

Nor can the task of developing such an order ignore the sacramental question. If a proper distinction is to be made between Christian baptism and what has heretofore been called "Infant Baptism," then we must ask ourselves, is one act to be considered "sacramental" and the other not? The alternative would be to affirm the sacramental character of both occasions, which if we take the functional distinction seriously, leaves us with three sacraments in place of two.

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