

BAPTISM AND REGENERATION

J.I. Packer, August 2013

_____ The practice of Holy Baptism as a rite of admission to church communion is integral to Anglicanism. So it has been throughout the church, with very few exceptions, from the start. Each version of the Book of Common Prayer has contained a baptismal liturgy that all have used; nineteenth century disputes between rival schools of thought about particular phrases in the set service did not affect its universal acceptance. This essay attempts to clear the ground for putting together a similarly acceptable baptismal liturgy for use in the Anglican Church in North America (ACNA), hopefully with theological agreement on all key points.

Baptism – a Sacrament

Mainstream Christianity views all created entities in a way for which the technical term is sacramentally: that is, as symbols reflecting God and imparting a sense of the divine that draws mind and heart Godward in adoring appreciation. Romans 1:19-20 tells us that this is how our maker meant it to be from the start. All perceptions of beauty, truth, love and value will bring positive recognition of God's being, goodness and power, save where sin in the heart keeps us from getting the message. It is against this background that God has instituted specific rites (actions done with created things) linked with specific words whereby he attests what the specific acts symbolize, and so confirms promises to, and furthers fellowship with, the recipients of his saving and enriching mercy.

The Bible sets before us four such rites, which most of the church through most of its life has called sacraments. (The Latin sacramentum means, in general, a holy thing, and in particular, an oath of loyalty.) Two of these rites were given to God's Old Testament covenant people, Abraham's offspring, the Jews; the other two are now given to God's New Testament covenant people, the church, that is to say all those everywhere who have faith in Jesus Christ as their God, Savior, Lord and Leader. Each of these two pairs consists of a rite of initiation and commencement plus a rite of commemoration and continuance. Circumcision and Baptism are initiatory rites; Passover and the Lord's Supper (also called Eucharist, Holy Communion, and Mass) were prescribed for regular repetition. The Bible makes it clear that observance of each rite has been given fundamental status in the faithful worship of God, but that for New Testament Christians, including believing Jews, Baptism and the Supper have replaced Circumcision and Passover, both being tokens of the new reality of life in Christ.

The Bible presents God's covenant as essentially an imposed enactment of promise and claim, corresponding to the suzerainty settlements that Mideast potentates in the ancient world imposed on conquered nations. In the Old Testament God frequently formulates his covenant thus: "I will be your God; you shall be my people" – a sentence that might be called the covenant slogan, or motto. The new covenant that Christ's death brought in (see Luke 22:20; 2 Cor. 3; Heb. 8-9) is a second edition of the covenant that God made with Israel through Abraham and Moses; the promise of protection and preservation, implicit in "I will be your God," and the claim of obedient submission implicit in "you shall be my people," remain unchanged, but the mediatorial monarchy of the man Christ Jesus, and present bestowal of transforming life from God through him via the Holy Spirit, have been added, and so has the revelation of the covenant God's triunity as the Father, the Son and the Spirit, three persons inseparable but distinct, operation as a team for our salvation. All this is reflected in the marching orders with which Jesus commissioned his disciples after his resurrection: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into (ESV mg.) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:18-20). It was under these orders that the apostles began their evangelistic work on Pentecost morning, after the Spirit was poured out, and they remain in force for the continuing covenant community (that is, the whole world church) at all times.

Anglican Article 25, "Of the Sacraments," begins by saying: "Sacraments ordained of Christ be not only badges or tokens of Christian men's profession of but rather" – the nuance is primarily – "they be certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our faith in Him." It is against this background that we must reason the closing sentence of Article 27, "Of Baptism," which states: "The Baptism of young children is in any case to be retained in the Church, as most agreeable with the institution of Christ." Infant baptism, here affirmed as a permanent ingredient in Anglican church life, is not mentioned in the New Testament, but is warranted by the following biblical facts:

First, Circumcision, to which Baptism, its replacement, corresponds, was as we saw the Old Testament rite of entry into the covenant community, and God commanded that it be administered to Jewish boys as eight-day-old infants (Gen. 17:12-13), the parental instruction following at a later stage (Ex. 12:26-27, 13:8, 14; Dt. 6:20-25, 11:19-21).

Second, the solidarity in God's covenant of children with parents is assumed throughout Scripture, from God's commitment to be the God of Abraham and his offspring (Gen 17:7-80), through Peter's Pentecostal declaration in Jerusalem that "the promise is for you and your children" (Acts 2:39), to Paul's argument that the truth that a Christian's children in a mixed marriage are "holy" (consecrated to and accepted by God with the parent) shows that God accepts the marriage and does not want it dissolved (1 Cor. 7:13-14).

Third, Jesus had little children brought to him, embraced and blessed them, and declared them models for adult faith (Mk. 10:13-16).

Fourth, it is unrealistic, if not actually evasive, to suppose that when the apostles and others baptized households (Act 16:15, 31-34; I Cor. 1:16) there were no very young children in any of the families.

In light of all this, and in the absence of any hint that Jesus or his apostles challenged the assumption of family solidarity that operated in rabbinic theology and Jewish proselyte baptism, the commendation of infant baptism in Article 25 seems to be fully justified.

Baptism – an Event

What then happens in baptism? What does administering this sacrament achieve? All the New Testament statements that bear on this question are made with reference to adult candidates, who having professed faith and repentance Christ-ward are receiving the rite, as Article 25 puts it, "rightly" pursuing this perspective, the Article affirms:

Baptism is not only a sign of profession, and mark of difference, whereby Christian men are discerned from other that be not christened [the authoritative Latin says, more clearly, "are not Christians"], but it is also a sign of Regeneration or New birth, whereby, as by an instrument, they that receive Baptism rightly are grafted into the Church; the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed; Faith is confirmed, and Grace increased by virtue of prayer unto God.

In sum, then, Article 27 tells us that (1) Baptism is truly a sign of Christian identity, but (2) is primarily a sign of regeneration (new birth), and (3) is a means of regeneration ("instrument" signifying not a tool, but a legal deed of conveyance) under five aspects: (i) incorporation of a person into the church; (ii) ratification to the person of God's promised forgiveness of sins; (iii)

ratification also of God's promised adoption of the person as son and heir; (iv) confirmation of the person's faith; (v) and augmenting of grace in the person's heart. Now, to undergird, frame and contextualize this sixteen-century Reformational statement, we add to it as follows:

The rite of Holy Baptism, being a sacrament, a divinely prescribed action with words, is a momentous event. It is a two-way covenanting occasion, at which both God and the candidate publicly pledge themselves to each other. The candidate is put under water, by immersion or pouring, in order then to be brought out and up from under, as we might say; this symbolizes union with the Lord Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection, and newness of life through, with, and in him, and the washing of sin's guilt and defilement (dirtiness) away from God's sight. The ritual exhibits these blessings pictorially and unconditionally extended to the candidate, who is to receive them by penitent faith – that is, submissive covenanting trust in Jesus Christ; and this is pictured by passively undergoing the minister's action with the water. Article 27 identifies this two-way covenanting and its five-fold consequence as regeneration and new birth, and this arguably matches New Testament usage, as we shall now see.

Regeneration and New Birth

In the New Testament, "regeneration" and "new birth" are not technical terms (words, that is, of precise meaning, positively, negatively and comprehensively defined) in the way that, for instance, the language of justification becomes technical terminology in Paul. They are, rather, pictorial parables, analogically illustrating themes in a way that a great deal of the language Jesus used in teaching does. They are terms that do not have sharp conceptual edges, nor are they precisely fitted into any given system of thought; rather, they are comprehensive panoramic pictures of a life reshaped, radical in thrust though unspecific in detail. Paul uses the word "regeneration" just once, when he speaks of "the washing of regeneration" in Titus 3:5, and new birth language he does not use at all. Jesus apparently spoke of new birth only once, and then enigmatically, to make Nicodemus the Pharisaic theologian aware that he did not know all he needed to know (John 3:3-8). While John's first letter gives insight into what people born of God believe and how they behave, and both James and Peter note that it is through the word of the truth of the Gospel that God effects the change (James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23-24), none of these passages spells out its exact nature. And on that, in fact, there are in the overall Christian tradition and most strikingly within Anglicanism two types of views.

Type one sees this regeneration/new birth/born-of-God imagery as symbolizing and illustrating a relational change: not a first implanting of life in any sense, any more than natural birth implants life in children who for nine months have been growing in the womb; but the total reordering of attitudes and actions that replacing self-centeredness with Christ-centeredness involves, in the way that newborn children must adjust across the board to their new environment outside the womb, and newly married couples must adjust across the board to each other. The church's pioneer theologians of the second and third centuries (whom, other things being equal, Anglicans desire to follow) thought of the matter in this way, and referred to Baptism as "the regeneration" – by which they meant that Baptism leads into a new and richer pattern of living, one that is given substance and shape both Godward and manward by the sharing in Christ's death and resurrection that the Holy Spirit effects through personal faith. This is the type of understanding that the five-fold fruitage of regeneration in Article 27 reveals, and that Anglican Prayer Books reflect when they speak of those who have received Baptism in the right way (that is, believingly) as now regenerate. Regeneration is here conceived as a dynamic, life-changing process in and through Christ, decisive in its initial stage and moving on towards perfection by what the church calls sanctification and the New Testament calls growth.

Type two, in contrast, regards regeneration in isolation, conceiving it simply as a work of the Holy Spirit in the heart, imparting a capacity for response to God that was not there before. This reduces regeneration, narrowing it to a "habit of grace" (as Medieval theologians put it) which Baptism infuses into, or creates within, each candidate; thus it conceives regeneration as an intrinsic change in the human subject, and that alone. The full-scale Christocentrism of type one is missing. "Grace" here means a dispositional inclination to serve God (the Medievals thought, meritoriously); but room is found for the notion that while this may express itself in immediate action, it also may not; it may at first lie dormant, as a seed may lie dormant in the soil for years before sprouting. So one may be regenerate for a long time without it showing. Yet during this period in which grace lies fallow (which may in fact be one's whole life) one should be regarded as a Christian, because one has been baptized. This kind of view has been widely held within Anglicanism, but it parts company with Article 27, and seems to picture administering the sacrament as a kind of sacred magic entrusted to the church, whereby a principle of inward spiritual vitality is generated in a mechanical and automatic way without faith being present as either a condition or a consequence of the action. Scripture does not support this idea; if true, it

would make indiscriminate Baptism – baptizing, that is, everyone everywhere, as St. Francis Xavier is supposed to have done - the church’s wisest and most necessary course; and it is no wonder that so many Anglicans hesitate to commit themselves to it, though they lack certainty as to what their view of Baptism should be.

Confusion and indeed impoverishment have been widespread in Anglican thinking about Baptism since the eighteenth century awakenings under George Whitefield and the Wesleys. This is due to a conjunction of two developments. One was the equating of regeneration with God’s evoking of a person’s first full response of faith in Christ according to the Gospel – an event that Reformed theology labels effectual calling. Emerging on the Continent among Reformers battling Medieval mistakes, this equation entered Anglican minds in the late sixteenth century through the influential theologian William Perkins, and seventeenth century Puritanism, Jonathan Edwards and England’s revivalists made it standard. The second development was that in revival evangelism and pastoral care it came to be thought important to assure people that while they must be regenerated (meaning, effectually called) to get to heaven, the receiving of Baptism in infancy did not regenerate them in the required sense. For that, an evangelical conversion to Christ was the necessary means. So, by default, Baptism came to be seen (and dismissed) as a mere formality of junior-member entrance into the Anglican organization; otherwise, though improperly trusted by some for salvation, it was a rite that effected nothing. The nineteenth-century Tractarian and Anglo-Catholic movements, inclining for the most part to some form of type two thought as described above, understandably reacted with some violence against the revivalist downplaying of Baptism’s significance and tensions resulting from the pendulum-swings remain with us today. It is, however, our hope and confidence that within ACNA, under God, these tensions can be transcended.

Infant Baptism Revisited

One last question.

If we recognize the covenantal character of the sacrament of Baptism, and follow the teaching of Articles 25 and 27, and go in principle with the first of view of baptismal regeneration that was set out above, we shall see the rite as given by God to focus and confirm faith in Jesus Christ and the gospel, and in the reality of the new covenant that binds God and ourselves to each other. We shall see Baptism as given to symbolize and pictorialize God’s bestowal of the key

promised blessings of the gospel (union with Christ in resurrection life in his body, the church; forgiveness of sins, through the cross; and adoption as God's sons and heirs; as Article 27 states); and to assure believers that these blessings are theirs now. But then, what was said earlier about infant Baptism might seem to need revisiting. Can it really be appropriate, after all, to baptize babies who are not yet capable of faith, and to pray for them as regenerate persons once they have been baptized, as has been standard Anglican practice historically?

Yes, for these reasons:

First, we must remember that the children who are duly accepted for Baptism are children of Christian parents, or at least of parents in process of becoming Christians. Parents-with-children, in the solidarity of the family, are the required reality at this point, a requirement unchanged since God first covenanted with Abraham and his offspring.

Second, as it is appropriate for royal children to be brought up knowing, accepting, and growing in their distinctive identity and vocation, so it is appropriate for Christians' children to be taught from the start what a huge privilege is theirs, in that they now belong to a spiritual royal family having God the Father as their second Father, and King Jesus as their elder brother, faithful friend, and wise guide for ever. It is right to tell them that their Baptism was God's acted-out message, showing them that this is so, and to stress to them that they must never forget it, but must live in the terms of it.

Third, all children brought to Baptism in Anglican churches have sponsors (parents and godparents) who vow full Christian commitment on their behalf and undertake, with prayer and as best they can, to ensure for them a fully Christian nurture, leading to full church membership through a public profession of faith at the Confirmation service, in due course.

Fourth, to bring up the children of Christian parents from their earliest years as junior church members, in families that worship and pray together both in church and at home (which Ephesians 6:1-4 and Colossians 3:20-21 would naturally suggest that Paul told converts to do) is quite certainly the most hopeful way of helping them towards adult faith.

Fifth, regeneration is the work of God reshaping a person's life by creating with them a multiple relationship of grace through faith (union with Christ in his church, justification and

adoption, as we have seen). In infant baptism we consecrate young children to God, commit them by proxy to thoroughgoing adult Christianity, ask God to bring this about, and administer to them God's own covenant sign, seal and bond of this full adult relationship. Believing that our actions accord with his will, and that he is a faithful, loving, prayer-answering God, we trust that he has now received the children covenantally and in some way started the work in them that we have asked him to do; so we finally pray that the children will be led on from regeneration thus begun into fullness of faith and faithfulness. Nothing else, surely, would fit the situation, or be honoring to God.