

Paul Beasley-Murray: "Baptism for the initiated" – 467-476 in **Baptism, the New Testament and the Church: Historical and Contemporary Studies in Honour of R.E.O.White** (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999) edited by S.E. Porter & A.R. Cross

The baptism of a person of mature faith

The invitation to contribute to this Festschrift in honour of R.E.O.White coincided with a request from one of my long-standing church members to be baptized. The person in question had been baptised as an infant and confirmed into the Church of England before her conversion. The latter took place at a Scripture Union camp, when at the age of 13 she "heard how Christ loved me and died for me and I accepted him as my Saviour and my Lord". With her nominal Anglican background the idea of being baptised as a believer never occurred to her. Later she joined our "open-membership" Baptist church, but saw no need to be baptized as a believer. Ever since her conversion she had been an active Christian, and for much of the time had been in positions of spiritual leadership. But then, after a lifetime of Christian service, she decided to be baptised. To quote from the testimony she gave on the day of her baptism:

"Slow learner, proud and obstinate as I am, I have only just decided to obey Jesus' command to be baptized. It had seemed to me just a minor matter; putting a small last part of the jigsaw in place - I should have known better. The last three weeks have been emotionally disturbing, exciting and un-nerving. It does not surprise me that, at Pentecost, the disciples were thought to be drunk! Soon after my decision to be baptized, to my utter amazement and consternation, my head seemed full of songs of praise and gladness which constantly interrupted my train of thought, even frequently, waking me up in the night! A fizz of praise and happiness filled my being. It seemed quite unwarranted, and, at first, unwanted by me, until I recognised that this astounding feeling of joy was God's precious gift to me. Then the bewilderment went and my heart was at rest. The joy and warm presence of Jesus continues. I long to serve him with all my being".

To say that the church was surprised by her testimony, is an understatement. For this was no immature, emotionally excitable woman speaking. This was an educated and sophisticated lady, a respected member of the community, a person of considerable maturity, speaking. Yet clearly a person in whose life God's Spirit was very much at work. We too shared in her joy. It was for us all a memorable baptismal service.

But to what degree was her baptism that day Christian baptism? It could scarcely be called a rite of Christian initiation. For she was a long-standing member of the church. Although she might not have been baptised, nonetheless over the years she had sought to fulfil the spirit of Romans 6 in dying to self and in living for Christ. The baptism of a mature Christian is surely very different from New Testament baptism.

At that same service we baptised a young man, who was - and is still - very much a raw recruit to the Christian faith. Coming from a non-Christian background his whole life had been turned upside down, when he became a Christian. In the words of his testimony:

"It was like I had stepped into a new world of love, faith and life. It was a bit like CS Lewis' book, **The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe**, where the children open an old

wardrobe, get into it and find an exciting new world called Narnia on the other side. This is what it felt like when I became a Christian... I am being baptised because I want to join God's worldwide family. I think now is the time to prove my faith to God, giving my life to Jesus as he did for me, and to be ready for anything God has for me over these following years".

His baptism was very much a rite of initiation. Baptism for him was the culmination of the conversion process. Baptism for him marked the end of the beginning of his journey of faith. His baptism was very different from the baptism of the other candidate.

All this was very much in my mind when I received the invitation to contribute to this Festschrift, to honour a man whose 'magnum opus' has been a major work on baptism entitled **The Biblical Doctrine Of Initiation**. As a working pastor it seemed right to look at baptism from the perspective of practise of ministry, and in particular to reflect on this not uncommon practice of the "baptism for the initiated". In particular I wish to reflect on the theological justification Baptists give to the practise of baptising those of mature faith.

Reflections of working pastors

In the first place I decided to write to a number of Baptist ministers, all in pastoral charge of sizeable churches, and all with a good deal of experience of ministry, to gain their views on the practise of baptising Christians of mature faith. I wrote to fifteen colleagues, and in my letter included the following:

"One of my current interests relates to *"the baptism of the initiated"*: i.e. the baptism of those who are already mature Christians and who have been part of a local church for many years. Although personally I have no problem with baptizing such people (this Sunday, for instance, I will be baptizing a Christian of 50 years standing who has occupied a significant position of Christian leadership in the past), nonetheless I am conscious that the baptism of mature Christians is very different in nature from New Testament baptism. Acts 2 and Romans 6 scarcely provide the pattern.

Needless to say, I have my own theological rationale for such baptising. However, as part of a small research project, I would be interested to know how other experienced Baptist ministers in pastoral charge handle this issue. I am therefore writing to you, as also to a few other ministers, in the hope that people might be willing to give me some of their time by putting into writing their own approach to what I have termed the baptism of the initiated"

Of the fifteen colleagues to whom this letter was sent, ten found time to reply. (In all fairness to those who failed to reply, I wrote in the period running up to Easter, which for most ministers is an exceedingly busy time), Not one of them said they had any reservations about baptising "the initiated". Indeed, in the words of one "better late than never"; while in the words of another, "I baptize anyone that I can lay my hands on!" The situation which I described was familiar to all. One colleague wrote that he would "actively encourage people of mature faith to be baptised" and just the day before had baptised a Christian in his seventies, who was a one-time Methodist lay preacher. Another colleague wrote: "I have not usually been proactive in exhorting long-time-initiated people to be baptized, other than talking about this when they first

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enquired about membership. I have, however, found that, if they come into membership "unbaptized" (we are an open membership church), they very often end up asking for baptism a year or two (or more) later"

All of them viewed baptism as an act of obedience, and therefore whatever else, a person of mature faith in being baptised is submitting to Christ's command. As one minister put it: "The sacraments of the communion of the Lord's Supper and believers' baptism are issues of obedience, and wherever believers act in obedience to the Lord's commands, their relationship with him is strengthened. I do believe, therefore, that where either of these sacraments is missing, the Christian is impoverished in his or her spirituality".

Although it was recognised that baptism is intended as a rite of initiation, one minister justified the baptism of the initiated on the "untidiness" we find in the New Testament itself with regard to the place of baptism and the beginnings of faith, and he referred to Cornelius and his household receiving the Spirit before they were baptised in water, and to the Ephesians Christians being defectively initiated.

Several respondents referred to the fact that we are all on a journey of faith and therefore, wrote one, the baptism of those mature in the faith can be viewed as "a response from people already on the way". Another respondent wrote: "We are all followers of Jesus right through our life and at different stages, in that pilgrimage, we may take steps of faith or declaration... I believe that at such a time of baptism there would be a quickening of the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer as they press on in their pilgrimage as a follower of Christ". Yet another respondent wrote: "I would see the process in a parallel way to some of the more recent research on how people are converted. In practice instant conversions are rare indeed; more usually it has been the Holy Spirit's work over many years - perhaps encouraged by Christian friends and by family - that brings them to the point of decision. In my experience *that* has also been true of those who come to a decision on believer's baptism in mature years". Accordingly that minister prefers to speak of believer's baptism in such a context as "more than an act of obedience", but rather "the decision of an informed conscience".

Only one respondent raised a point of concern relating to the baptism of the initiated, and this related to a pastoral rather than a theological issue: "Pastorally my greatest worry is that the desire to be baptised as an 'experienced' Christian can be very manipulative, e.g. to get onto the diaconate; impress younger members of the family; have-a-go at the church. I raise any/all or similar points in preparation". However, that concern in no way stops that respondent baptising Christians of mature faith. Indeed, in his letter he stated that it was a very common experience for him at present.

One final observation. Not one of the respondents had any difficulty in baptizing those who had already been "baptised" as infants. All of them appeared to accept the traditional Baptist view that baptism without faith (of the candidate) is not Christian baptism. As one said: "Neither infant baptism nor confirmation are biblical and therefore I take no notice of these facts".

Reflections of Baptist writers

From working pastors I turned to books and articles of Baptist writers. Interestingly, none of them - to my knowledge at least - touch upon this issue of the baptism of those who have already been initiated into Christ and his church.

An examination, for instance, of past copies of the **Baptist Quarterly** reveals that although there has been constant interest in the relationship between believers baptism and infant baptism, nothing has been written about the baptism of those of mature faith¹. Likewise **The Baptist Ministers' Journal** and its predecessor, **The Fraternal**, have a good number of articles on baptism, but none which mentions the not infrequent practice of the baptism of those who to all intents and purposes have already been initiated into Christ and his Church².

The same would appear to be true of Baptists who have written books on baptism - R.E.O.White included. G.R. Beasley-Murray, for instance, in his classic treatment of baptism, **Baptism In The New Testament**, devotes a lengthy postscript to the relationship between infant baptism and believer's baptism, where he denies the validity of the former and its identity with the latter, and yet "in respect for the conscience of our fellow-Christians the like charity, which we trust will be exercised towards us" he goes on to ask:

"Could we not refrain from requesting the baptism of those baptized in infancy who wish to join our churches and administer baptism to such only where there is a strong plea for it from the applicant?"³

However, this is not the concern of this essay. The issue here does not revolve around "re-baptism" and its validity⁴. Neither is the concern of this essay to develop some rite to mark the "renewal of faith", although in this respect it is of interest to note the findings of the Fourth International Anglican Liturgical Consultation, Toronto 1991, which suggested that a ceremony, including immersion in water, be devised, to enable someone baptized as an infant to dramatically celebrate their new faith in Christ⁵. Rather the focus of this essay is on the baptism

¹ See, for instance, Michael J. Quicke's survey, "Baptists And The Current Debate On Baptism", **Baptist Quarterly** XXIX, No 4 (October 1981) pp. 153-169

³ George R.Beasley-Murray, **Baptism In The New Testament** (Macmillan, London 1962) 392. See also George R.Beasley-Murray, **Baptism Today and Tomorrow** (Macmillan, London 1966), where this argument is developed at length. And most recently see George R.Beasley-Murray, "The Problem of Infant Baptist: an Exercise in Possibilities" pp.11-14 in **Festschrift Gunter Wagner** (Peter Lang, Berne 1994) edited by Faculty of Baptist Theological Seminary, Ruschlikon/Switzerland, where the argument is taken even further and the plea is made that "churches which practise believer's baptism should consider acknowledging the legitimacy of infant baptism, and allow members in Paedobaptist churches the right to interpret it according to their consciences. This would carry with it the practical consequence of believer-baptist churches refraining from baptizing on confession of faith those who have been baptized in infancy".

⁵ **Christian Initiation In the Anglican Communion: The Toronto Statement 'Walk In Newness Of Life'** (Grove, Nottingham 1991), edited by David R.Holeton, p.18. The eirenical

of those of mature faith, whether or not they have been baptised as infants.

Interestingly Thorwald Lorenzen at the 1979 Louisville Consultation on Believers' Baptism sponsored by the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches touched on the issue, but never truly developed it. Thus in his paper he raised "the following dilemma":

"Take the case of a Christian who was baptized as an infant and who was a 'confessing' Christian in a Christian Church, but now applies for membership in a Baptist Church. If the Baptist church insists on baptism as a pre-requisite for membership, then that baptism neither stands on the threshold of that person's Church membership, because he or she was a member of a Christian Church before; nor does the baptism signify the beginning of the Christian life, because the person was a Christian before. On the other hand, Baptists cannot recognize infant baptism as a valid baptism. Thus the only way out of this dilemma is an 'open membership' policy, whereby an applicant can be accepted on his confession of faith in Christ, of, if he or she desires so, he/she can be baptized"⁶.

The question, however, arises: what meaning would such a baptism have? What would be its theological basis. Unfortunately, Thorwald Lorenzen does not elaborate on this matter.

A little later, without at that stage being aware of Thorwald Lorenzen's paper, I too in the context of seeking to justify the practice of open membership, raised the apparent difficulty posed by the baptism of the person of mature faith. Thus in **Radical Believers: The Baptist Way of Being the Church**, a book perhaps significantly written at a stage when I was a college principal rather than a working pastor, I wrote: "If baptism is a 'rite of initiation', then the baptism of those who have been Christians for a good number of years and who have been in good standing with another Christian church would not really be baptism in the New Testament sense!"⁷

Personal reflections

The baptism of a person of mature faith is clearly different from the kind of baptism described in Acts 2, where Luke describes how on the day of Pentecost some 3000 people were baptized and added to the church. In the New Testament baptism always has the newly converted in view. Indeed, baptism in the New Testament appears to be part of the conversion process itself (see, e.g. 1 Pet 3.21). As Paul in Romans 6 makes clear, baptism is more than a mere symbol of Christian commitment, it is the moment when we fully commit ourselves to the Christ who died and rose for us.

spirit sharply contrasts with the stance adopted by Colin Buchanan, **One Baptism Once** (Grove, Nottingham 1978) p.22, who urges that baptized a second time should, in writing and in the presence of witnesses, formally renounce their second baptism!

⁷ Paul Beasley-Murray, **Radical Believers: The Baptist Way Of Being The Church** (Baptist Union of Great Britain, Didcot 1992) p.21. The Baptist Donald Bridge and the Anglican David Phipers make a similar point, when in their joint contribution to the baptism debate they suggest that the baptism of mature Christians is tantamount to a "new sacrament"! See **The Water That Divides** (IVP, Leicester 1977) pp170-171.

But the fact that there are very clear differences between the baptism of a new Christian and the baptism of a mature Christian, does not mean that the latter has been emptied of meaning. Nor does it mean that such a baptism does not reflect anything of New Testament baptism. As I have reflected on the issue since returning to the pastorate, I have been able to develop a quite clear theological rationale for this practice, a rationale based upon the New Testament teaching of baptism, and would therefore wish to modify my earlier statement made in **Radical Believers**.

1. An act of obedience

Baptism, whenever it takes place, is an act of obedience. In the Great Commission found in Matthew 28.18-20 baptism is clearly part of the disciple-making process. The fact that in the disciple-making process Jesus envisages teaching normally following the baptizing, does not mean that the command has no validity once the teaching stage has well and truly begun. To use an analogy, the fact that a couple have been living together for some time does not mean that a minister would refuse to conduct a marriage service on the grounds that such a service would be no longer relevant. Just as ideally couples living together need to regularise their union in a service of marriage, so too ideally Christians who have not been baptised need to regularise their commitment to Christ and his church by being baptised. Baptism is not an optional extra. It is a clear command of the Risen Christ.

2. A following of Christ's example

In baptism we follow in the footsteps of Christ, who at the age of 30 was baptised and in so doing sought to "fulfil all righteousness" - or as the Good News Bible puts it, to "do all that God requires" (Mt 3.15). As has often been recognised, the parallels between Christ's baptism and ours are not exact. Baptism for Jesus marked his first step to the Cross, for there in the River Jordan he identified with us in our *sinfulness*. Whereas by contrast in our baptism we identify ourselves with Christ in his *sinlessness*. Nonetheless, in baptism Jesus submitted to his Father's will - and so too do we. A further parallel is often drawn, viz that just as baptism marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry, so too our baptism marks the beginning of our service for God. At first sight this parallel seems to have no relevance to the Christian of mature faith, who may have already sought to live a life of service to God over many years. On the other hand, what then are we to make of the first 30 years of Jesus' life? Was he then not serving his Father, albeit quietly? Surely his baptism marked not the beginning of his commitment to his Father's will, but rather a new stage of commitment. In that sense there is surely a parallel to the baptism of people of mature faith, who are entering upon a fresh stage of commitment to their Lord..

3. A surrender of life to Christ

Baptism is the moment when we identify ourselves with the Christ who died and rose for us (Rom 6.3-4: see also Col 2.12). As we go under the water, we are buried with Christ - and in being buried with Christ we become "united with him in a death like his" (Rom 6.5). Through baptism we enter into the reality of the death and burial of Jesus. And, having shared in his death, we share in his resurrection too (see also 2 Cor 5.14,15). In turn this sharing in the resurrection with Christ demands a life set free for righteousness (see also Rom 6.10-14). Baptism therefore is far more than a mere act of obedience. It is also a moment of total

surrender to Christ. In the water we also express our resolve to die to self and to live for Christ alone.. If the truth be told, many - if not most - new Christians have little idea at the time of their baptism of the full implications of the Lordship of Christ on their lives. Whereas at least in the case of Christians of mature faith, they have a much better idea of what Christ is demanding of them. Baptism for a person of mature faith can have all the connotations of full surrender - it is for them an occasion when they open the door of their hearts wide to the Risen Christ (Rev 3.20).

4. A reception of the Spirit

From a New Testament perspective baptism marks a twofold commitment: we commit ourselves to God in response to his love for us expressed in Jesus, but God in turn further commits himself to us through his Spirit. Baptism in the New Testament is always associated with the activity of the Spirit (see, e.g., Acts 2.38; 1 Cor 6.11; Eph 1.13-14; Tit 3.5). This is clearly true of the new convert. It is also true of the Christian of mature faith. For God does not limit the giving of his Spirit to the beginnings of the journey of faith. God is generous and is constantly giving of his Spirit to those who open their lives to him, at whatever stage of the journey of faith they may be. Indeed, the Apostle Paul urges the Ephesians to be filled with the Spirit, and as the tense of the Greek verb indicates, this experience involves not a one-off filling, but an ongoing filling of the Spirit (Eph 5.18). Certainly my experience of baptizing Christians of mature faith is that time and again God has used their baptism to bless them afresh with a new in-filling of the Spirit. In their admittedly belated baptism in water many Christians of mature years a new baptism of the Spirit. This is not surprising, because it is precisely when we truly surrender our lives to Jesus, that we are most open to receive from him.

5. A confession of faith

Last but not least baptism provides an opportunity for Christians to nail their colours publicly to the mast and to declare to all the world that they belong to Christ. It is the moment of "good confession in the presence of many witnesses" (1 Tim 6.12). Clearly this is a special opportunity for new Christians to declare to their friends and family their faith in the Lord Jesus - particularly when they have come from a non-Christian background. But there is no reason why this cannot be an opportunity for Christians of mature faith to do the same - in a way that cannot be true of a new Christian, they can testify to the faithfulness of God.

A concluding reflection

In the light of the above, a good case for baptising people of mature faith can indeed be made on the basis of the New Testament understanding of baptism. Such a baptism can be rich in meaning and can at the same time richly bless the individual being baptised. There is a place for the baptism of the initiated.

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