

Chapter IV

The Question of Infant Baptism

In principle baptism is a sacrament, which unites all Christian communities. But there are minor differences among them regarding its understanding. For example, a few churches, especially those having a shorter history of their own, question the practice of Infant Baptism. To adjudge which is right and which is wrong, we have to understand the meaning of baptism as given by the teachers of the Church in the beginning, I mean those of the New Testament times, and their immediate successors.

The Origin of Christian Baptism

We don't find something like the sacrament of baptism in the Old Testament writings. What we have there are the ritual washing of Israelites (Num 19,11-22), the washing after the healing ministry of prophet Elisa (2Kgs 5,10-14) and the eschatological washing prophesied by prophets Ezekiel (Ez 36,25-26) and Zechariah (Zech 13,1).

However, there evolved groups of people within Judaism, who had practiced something like our baptism, during the two centuries before the birth of Christ. These were people like the Essenes, who enjoyed a community life in the Judean deserts. What they used to do was a ritual washing, which symbolized their bondage, and it gave them initiation in to the community. This washing was, however, done by the person himself and not performed by a third person; "a man washes himself and joins the community" was the principle.

A close parallel to our baptism can be identified in the history of Jews only during the time of Jesus. There was a movement led by John the Baptist, who got the name "Baptist" because of his emphasis on baptism as a way to enter the Kingdom of God. He announced the nearness of the Kingdom of God and the Divine Judgment and he asked the people to repent and be baptized. The ceremony of baptism was preceded by "a confession of sins" (Mt 3,6), in which he gave a counseling also (Lk 3,10-14). Those who repented and confessed their sins were baptized by John in the river of Jordan.

Even our Lord Jesus Christ himself came before John for being baptized. We may perhaps ask: why should Jesus be baptized by John? John was only the herald of Jesus and he gave the testimony "one who comes after me is mightier than me". John puts this question before Jesus; "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (Mt 3,14). Jesus answers; "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Mt 3,15). In a nutshell, the baptism of Jesus was a divine decision; Jesus continued the ministry of John, although in a different way.

Thus we can say; with the baptism of Jesus and descend of the Holy Spirit upon him a new era was broken, i.e. the Era of Christian Church.

Salient Features of Christian Baptism

Although the origin of Christian baptism owes much to the baptism of John, it was not a replica of the other. John himself utters the difference; “I baptize you with water...but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and the fire” (Lk 3,16). John asks his followers also to join the community of Jesus (Jn 1,35-37). However, some of the disciples of John remained as such even after the death of John. Later when they wanted to become the disciples of Jesus, they were blessed by the laying of hands which gave them the Holy Spirit (Acts 19,1-6). The Greek text of this passage makes it clear that even though these people were ready to be baptized again, Paul did not rebaptize them; he only laid his hands on them for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

As per the Great Commission of the resurrected Lord (Mt 28,16-20) the disciples went around the world and preached his Gospel. They baptized those who were willing to become the disciples of Christ. However, the way in which a believer was baptized had been developed during the first three centuries. Those who had repented their sins were either immersed fully in water just like Philip the eunuch (Act 8,38-39) or received the sprinkling of water as mentioned in the case of the three thousand people baptized by Peter (Act 2,37-42). When the believer was immersed in water he experienced the pain of death of our Lord on the cross and when he came out of the water he realized the joy of resurrection (Rom 6,1-4). A baptismal prayer was uttered during the baptism, which runs like the following: (some body) is baptized “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the spirit of our God” (1Cor 6,11). Because of this baptism was called to be the bath of rebirth (Jn 3,1-7). One who baptized used to put his hands over the head of the candidate and that gave him the gift of the Holy Spirit (Act 8,17;19,6). The distinguishing features Christian Baptism were the following:

1. Christian Baptism was not simply a ritual washing, which was done by the believer himself; rather it was performed by a third person, who was the disciple of Christ.
2. It was definitely a baptism of water and the Spirit (Jn 3,5) and the gift of the Spirit distinguished Christian baptism from John’s baptism.
3. The believer was baptized “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God” (1Cor 6,11). Later on this was done in the name “of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28,19).
4. One who wanted the baptism had to repent and confess his sins; By baptism all his sins were forgiven and he was expected to lead a new life in Christ (2Cor 5,17).
5. After baptism everybody had the same right and privilege in the Church. There was no distinction based on sex, religion or social status; man and woman, Jew and gentile and master and slave enjoyed were alike in Christ.

Baptism led the believer in to a new community. Therefore St. Paul calls baptism “a circumcision with out hands” (Col 2,11-12). As a sign of their belongingness to Christ the baptized people gathered together and celebrated the Eucharist (Act 2,42). Thereafter they were expected to live a life of unity and oneness in Christ; St. Paul admonished the first generation Christians to keep themselves away from all kinds of dissensions (1Cor 11,17ff.).

Ceremony of Baptism Today

The Orthodox Church allows infants as well as adults to receive the baptism. When somebody is baptized in the name of the father, Son and the Holy Spirit he puts off his identity as an “old man”, which is the subject of this sinful universe and he becomes a “new creation”. To symbolize this act the name of the candidate will be written in the Baptismal Register of the Church. Then the priest calls him/her to receive the baptism by making three crosses on his temple.

Exorcism is an important symbolic act of baptism. The priest makes nine crosses on the candidate and prays for his deliverance from Satan and his kingdom. Then the candidate will refuse Satan three times and take an oath of allegiance to God. If the candidate is an infant, this will be done by the Godfather/ mother. Then he will be anointed with the *oil of joy*. By this act he/ she will be joining the Church, the Bride of Christ. This anointment with the olive oil will graft him to Jesus, the olive tree (Rom. 11,17).

The washing of the candidate with water reminds us the baptism of Jesus. When he was baptized at a spot in the river of Jordan, were two streams, one with hot water and the other with cold water, met together. Similarly, we are baptized in a mixture of hot and cold water. The water of the baptismal pond will be sanctified by pouring the Holy Myron in it. The prayer of the invocation of the Spirit reminds us the descend of the Holy Spirit at the time of the baptism of Jesus. After washing the candidate receives the Holy Spirit by the anointment of the Holy Myron through out his body.

The baptized receives a crown, which symbolizes his entry in to the *chosen race, royal priesthood, a Holy nation and God's own people* (1 Pet. 2,9). Just as the Early Church gave Eucharistic communion to all the believers, we give the body and blood of Christ to the baptized (Act. 2,42). Thus our baptismal liturgy has three rites; immersion in water, anointment of the Holy Myron and the Eucharistic Communion. The Lutherans do these on three different occasions, whereas the Catholic gives communion to the baptized at a later stage.

The question of Infant Baptism

The infant baptism is a practice in the mainstream of Christianity. Only a very few among the Christians like the Baptists and Pentecostal Churches question its validity. They would ask whether it is Biblically based, whether the children can receive the Holy Spirit, whether they could understand what happens and whether

they believe in Jesus Christ. I would like to point out the following to address these questions:

1. We have already seen the orthodox position on Bible in the earlier chapters. We believe that Bible is not the only source for the divine revelation and therefore the only basis for our faith and religious practices. The teachings of the Fathers and the decisions of the Councils (Holy Synods) add to our belief. So long as they do not contradict the faith about baptism we take them as decisive. The baptismal prayers of the Early Church can also be taken as proof texts for our discussion about the topic.
2. Many of the religious practices of Christians are not mentioned as such in the Bible. For example, there are no details about the marriage ceremony in the Bible. Even in the narration of the Wedding at Cana (Jn 2,1ff.) we don't get any information about the wedding ceremony. Whether the partners were joined in a common religious place, whether there was a prayer for that or whether there was a sermon of Jesus we don't know. The thing about funeral is the same. We don't know how a dead person can be buried from the New Testament. But at the same time we read the meaning of family life and resurrection of the dead in many of its passages. Similarly, what baptism means is mentioned in the New Testament. But its procedural details had been developed at a later stage.
3. Absence of passages in the New Testament should not be an argument for refusing the Infant Baptism. Rather the silence of the Bible is the best support for the topic. Whatever we have in the Bible are written in the contexts of theological debates and heretical backgrounds. For example, the Gospels were written to safe guard the Church from heretical teachings against the virgin birth and resurrection of Jesus. Therefore you may find more space for narrations about these. This is the reason for the silence about the life of Jesus between his entry in to Jerusalem temple as an adolescent and his baptism. The evangelists themselves say that the gospels do not include everything Jesus did and said (Jn 20,30-31; 21,25). Outside the Gospels St. Paul's writings are the main resources for major theological topics. There also he handled debated issues only. For example, we don't have a single sentence about the life of Jesus in any part of his epistles. Everything is about themes like virgin birth, death of Jesus on the cross and the resurrected Christ. Disputed issues in the life of the Early Church are his other main topics. Since Infant Baptism was not a debated issue Pauline Epistles also do not include it in their discussions.
4. The fact that only grown up people were baptized in the beginning of the Church is not a valid argument in our case. This is true of every

new development in history. When Abraham was circumcised he was 99 years old and Ishmael was 13 years old (Gen 17,24-25). But Isaac was circumcised on the 8th day (Gen 21,4) and all the Jewish children including Jesus were circumcised as per this practice (Lk 2,21). If baptism is established in place of circumcision (Col 2,11-12), can't we accept this historical reality without doubt?

5. However, there are enough reasons to think that children were members of the Early Church. In the Acts of the Apostles we read about the baptism of the "houses" (Greek- *oikos*). The families of Cornelius (Act 10,48), Lydia (Act 16,15), the jailor (Act 16,33) and Crispas (Act 18,8). St. Paul had also baptized the household of Stephanus (1Cor 1,16). Joachim Jeremias, a renowned German scholar of the New Testament, had an interesting debate with Kurt Aland, another German scholar of the Early Church a couple of decades ago. Jeremias did a wonderful study of the *oikos formula* of the Acts of the Apostles and there he found good support for the infant baptism during the time of the Early Church. That children were there in the baptized families is proved by Jeremias with the help of Bible only.
6. We have got references to the children of the Early Church at some portions of the Bible. In the instructions of St. Paul to the Churches he addresses the members of the Church one after another (Col 3,18-4,1; Eph 5,22-6,9). There he calls the "children" separately (Col 3,20; Eph 6,1). The same we see in the first Epistle of St. John too (1Jn 2,1.18). If the children were not baptized in the Apostolic age, why these exhortations?
7. Some people say children can not profess the faith in Jesus. But what we have to ask is: Does Jesus want us to choose him? For he says: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you may bear fruit and your fruit should abide" (Jn 15,16). We have to submit the children to God and He will accept them.
8. God had chosen many of his servants when they were in their mother's womb (Is 49,1; Jer 1,5; Lk 1,15.44). Jesus loves children. When his disciples blocked the children from going to Jesus, he said: "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the Kingdom of God" (Lk18,16). His disciples were asked by Jesus to become like children (Mt 18,3).
9. For many Mk 16,16 is the biggest hurdle to Infant Baptism. It categorically denies baptism to those who do not believe. However, we have to check the Bible once more. If you look in your Bible you may see the Mk 16,9-20 is put within brackets. This is because of the doubt about its authenticity. This portion is available only in some later

manuscripts of the Bible. Therefore it can not stand as proof for an argument like the present.

10. Can the children receive Holy Spirit as a result of the belief of those who carry them? Yes, of course. The paralytic, who was carried by four men were cured by the faith of the four (Mk 2,5). The former could not even utter a single word there. The servant of the centurion (Mt 8,5-13) and the daughter of the Canaanite woman (Mt 15,21-18) were also cured by the faith of those who approached Jesus. St.Paul also underlines this when he said that people of a family could be saved by the faith of the fellow beings (1Cor 7,14).

All the above points say that infant baptism is neither against the teachings of the Bible nor theologically baseless. Fathers of the Church like Irenaeus (133-203 AD), Origen (185-254 AD) and Hippolytus (ca. 215 AD) lived just after the completion of the scriptural writings. They give enough materials to prove that Infant Baptism was a practice of the Early Church. Under these circumstances we do practice it. We give our children whatever is the best for them before they ask for it. We buy the best food and clothing for them; we choose the best schools for their benefit. Similarly, we present them before the Lord so that He may save them. Since we do not want them to be in any casualties before being baptized and before receiving the Grace of God we baptize the children at the earliest.