

On Understanding the Presbyterian Order for Infant Baptism

Ritual has a real role to play in religion – as in life – you couldn't get through breakfast without a certain amount of ritual – but, in religion especially, many see no point in it whatsoever, and many think they see the point but miss it altogether. This is especially true of the ritual of infant baptism – most Christians get the point of a funeral or wedding, but may miss out altogether when it comes to baptism, especially infant baptism.

For to some, the words that are said in this rite are meaningless – so much rigmarole! As far as they are concerned, we might as well be saying, “Here we go ‘round the mulberry bush” – just so many nonsense words – or it may be to them a senseless social convention like the receiving line at a reception, where you can mutter any inanity and get by with it – just something one does because? Oh, well, others do it.

Is the ritual of infant baptism essentially meaningless to you?

To others, this sacrament is not meaningless; it is magical. Though they would not say so, they feel that it casts a spell – to protect the child from harm or assure its place in heaven – the words of ritual become a sort of holy Presbyterian hocus-pocus – the water, a charm. Logically, therefore, what does this attitude make the black-robed parson? A sorcerer's apprentice?

Come now, is the sacrament of infant baptism essentially magical to you?

To others, of course, it is neither meaningless nor magical – it is just movingly sentimental. Their reaction to the ritual is, “Now isn't that sweet!” They give a simpering smile, shed a tear or two, and there's an end to it. Now, don't mistake me, if it is sincere and sensitive to the true significance of the sacrament, there is a real place for sentiment here. But is this all there is to it – just a brief moment to catch the glory of parenthood and the sweet mystery of new life?

No. To the serious Christian, the sacrament of infant baptism is not meaningless – it is not magical – and it is more than movingly sentimental.

Then what is it? Let's follow the order and find out.

(1) The “opening Biblical sentences” and the “theological Explanation” say what it is. It is the mark of the covenant. This word “covenant” is the key word. As believing adults belong to the Christian community “through the covenant made in Christ” – so also do the children. A

child of believing parents is born into the church – a member “engrafted into Christ” from birth – a little fellow already “welcome in the household of God.” Very simply, the sacrament of infant baptism marks this fact – the elder stands with the parents to represent the people of God to whom the child also belongs, and the ensuing ritual lays upon both parents and people certain covenant responsibilities for the child’s welfare.

What responsibilities? Well, the parents are confronted with theirs right away – for in the 2nd place

(2) They are asked 2 questions. The Christian community wants to know 2 things about them before they are willing to baptize that baby. One – if they confess their own faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour; and two – if they promise to bring up their child in something called the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

As to the first question, obviously if the parents are not serious believers themselves – for example, if they are a couple of cynics, or a pair of beatniks, or Zen Buddhists, or society Presbyterians for the sake of convention – just giving the baby a Church debut because it is the thing to do – a sort of ecclesiastical shower – maybe followed in the afternoon by a cocktail celebration – then the whole thing is a farce – a ridiculous ritual – for the 2 parents are about to make some promises, which, if they are not Christian, they can neither understand nor keep.

This is the reason at least one parent must be a professing Christian – the reason why the sacrament can not be administered otherwise – what would be the sense of it?

One or both of the parents being Christian, however, the next question is valid and lays upon them a heavy responsibility: “do you promise ... to bring up your child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?”

“Nurture” is an old word meaning “teaching” – “education” – “training.” Thus, before administering the sacrament, the Christian community wants to know if the parents are going to teach their child the Christian religion as true from the very beginning. Otherwise, the community is not going to baptize the child and give it a Christian name. None of this nonsense about waiting until children are 10 or 20 or 40 or more to make up their own minds about religion. If the Christian faith is true, it’s true, and it’s needed from the beginning. Do we not teach a child correct grammar and arithmetic and eating habits from the start? Do we wait until he’s 10 or whatnot and let him make up his own little mind if “I seen and I taken” and “2 x 2= 5” and a diet of all sweets is correct? No – from the beginning a child must be taught correct

grammar, correct math, correct diet, etc., or else he blunders along idiotically on his own. In the same manner, why let a child grow up a religious ignoramus; why let him blunder along in fear and hate and greediness, if from the beginning he can be taught to walk in faith and love and graciousness? So, Christian nurture, instruction begins at once and at home and at first very simply – the voice of the parent saying, ” God loves you, Jimmy – God forgives you, Tommy – God wants you to be kind, David – Let us read God’s word together; let us talk to God in prayer.” Then, on increasingly higher intellectual levels as the child grows, teaching the Sunday School lesson in the family, explaining the doctrines, interpreting the faith in terms of his ever increasing knowledge – quite a job for parents, this basic Christian teaching – instructing growing minds in the meaning of the incarnation, the atonement, the trinity, the church – and every Christian parent must be able to do this for their child, in a way that satisfies the child’s curiosity about the profounder things in life. Christian parents should be able to give instruction to the child in more than etiquette, baseball, geography, diet, grammar, and whatnot. Christian parents should also be able to give instruction in Christian theology. The Church can never take their place!

But before being willing to mark this child as a part of the covenant community, the parents are asked about more than their teaching ability.

They are asked, “Do you promise to bring up your child in the nurture – yes, but also – in the admonition of the Lord?” Admonition is another old word – it means to admonish – to correct – to discipline – basically, to give a conscience to – a sense of right and wrong. And this involves more than teaching by words; it involves a sense of authority – a sensible and sensitive use of punishment – and most of all, it involves example. Unfortunately, children don’t come with a conscience as standard equipment; this is extra, and the logical persons to supply it are the parents. The church and school can work on the conscience some – adjust it – but basically, the child’s sense of right and wrong comes from its parents. And mostly by example. Some time ago we were talking in the children’s groups about cheating and lying. One little fellow said, before he could be hushed up, “My folks say not to cheat and lie, but they do it all the time; they run stop signs, say they’re not going to be home when they are, call people good names to their face and bad names later, and ... “ Well, that’s enough. We all know we teach a child love, not just by words, but by loving him and letting him see we love one another. We teach discipline by being disciplined – forgiveness by being forgiven.

“Do you promise to bring up your child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?” Are you going to teach him Christian theology and the Christian ethic and be a living example of it yourself?

Oh, yes, it’s a heavy question – the parents take a deep breath – and “in dependence on the grace of God” – make the leap of faith, promising, “I do.” It’s as joyous and as serious a promise as the one they made the day they were married.

And now, as on that day, they’ll need God’s grace and guidance, his strength and all the skill they can muster to make a go of it. So, no wonder the minister says, “Let us pray.” Under such responsibility, it is saying, “God help you.”

(3) Thereupon, in the 3rd place, once the Christian community has heard the parents confess their own faith in Christ and heard them promise to teach this faith to and live this faith for their child, now and only now is the church ready to give the child its covenant mark and Christian name. This is why your first name is called your Christian name – for it was given you at your Christian baptism. This is also the origin of the word “Christening” – if you say “Christian naming” fast enough you get – Christening. But, get this now, for Presbyterians, Christening is only one small part and not the most important part of the sacrament. So we never call this sacrament “Christening”, but always “infant baptism.” We do more here than “Christening” – “Christian naming.”

In this naming, however, we follow today a wording that is at least medieval. The child was usually baptised at 8 days, which undoubtedly increased the infant mortality rate, and up until that day, no one knew what the child’s first or Christian name was to be.

So there was an air of excitement in the dark cathedral, a hush among the family and friends gathered for the sacrament – when the old priest asked the father, “And what is the Christian name of this your child?” The father would whisper the name to the priest, “Geoffrey.” He would then pronounce it to the people, “Geoffrey.” The priest then looked down at the child and said, “Child of the covenant, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen,” and gave the blessing, “The blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit descend upon thee, little one, and dwell in thine heart forever.”

We still say these words today. The baptismal Trinitarian is from the New Testament, though there is nothing in the New Testament that specifically requires baptism of infants. We do so because of the New Testament concept of the covenant – about which we have talked – of

the corporate nature of the Church. That we think children should be marked in this way and parents and people reminded in this way of their Christian duty to the children.

We sprinkle water on the child's head, not out of any belief that this operates authentically to symbolize the cleansing that living in covenant with Christ brings to heart and home – and we do not quibble about the amount of water used for we think it is the faith that counts and not the form. The faith is New Testament; the form often goes astray – the form is secondary. The word “baptize” does mean “put under” the water, but if you sprinkle a few drops on a child's head, he is under it, isn't he? Not over it.

(4) There now follows that which indicates this sacrament should, if possible, be administered in the church, before the congregation, that which makes this ritual of importance to all the people, not just to the parents and family and friends – but to the whole Christian community, even including us bachelors, maiden ladies, and couples with no children of their own – for this last part of the ritual assures the parents of the interest, the prayers, and the assistance of the whole church in this process of Christian Education – looking toward the day when this child – shall – at his confirmation – confirm on his own – that the instruction and example in Christianity he has been given has taken effect – that he affirms now, for himself, that he is a Christian, and shall believe and behave like one, and someday promise to bring up his own child in “the nurture and admonition of the Lord.”

There follow prayers that God will give us strength and insight suited to this task.

And as the parents walk toward the door, they and we all know their work and our work for that child has just begun – just begun.

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