

BASIC CHRISTIANITY

Lecture Number 12

BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION

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INTRODUCTION

“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” [John 3:3].

“Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” [John 3:5]

A person is unable even to see, to perceive, the kingdom of God if he has been only *naturally* born. And for one to enter into that kingdom, according to Jesus, a *re*-birth is essential.

He does not say that rebirth is all that we need, any more than natural birth makes a person a full grown mature natural adult. But natural birth is the essential beginning.

God accomplishes this essential rebirth *sacramentally* through the Church.

BAPTISM IN APOSTOLIC TIMES

St. Paul says, “Our savior Jesus Christ...gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify unto himself a peculiar people”. [Titus 2:24]

St. Peter says, “Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.” [I Peter 2:9]

“A peculiar people”—The first Christians were very conscious of sharing in a unique cultural heritage.

That heritage included the whole history of the Jews as reflected in the Old Testament. But even more importantly, it included the Baptism, Life, Crucifixion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus, as well as the experience of Pentecost and what came after it.

That meant that every convert somehow had to “make up” whatever part of that heritage he was lacking.

So in the case of Jewish converts they were simply baptized and confirmed.

Non-Jewish converts spent two years, or more, being steeped, in Jewish (Old Testament) history. And only then were they baptized and confirmed.

Baptism and Confirmation normally occurred once a year at Easter when the Church celebrated

the Resurrection, the “Exodus” of the New Covenant. [Luke 9:1. The Greek word translated “decease” or “departure” is *exodon*]

Outside of Palestine, the meetings of Christians were held in private homes which were normally laid out in the classic Roman style. They were arranged around a central courtyard, or room with a hole in the roof, called the *atrium*. In the center of the atrium was a shallow pool, about 18 inches deep, called the *impluvium*.

At one end of the atrium there was a raised area with a stone table standing on it. That table was a relic of the former days when each family had an altar to its family gods.

The bishop would be seated behind the table facing the rest of the atrium. On each side of him would be seated the elders of the congregation. The bishop was attended by several servants, called deacons (from the Greek word *diakonos*, meaning waiter or servant).

The service began in the middle of the night before Easter morning. The congregation assembled in total darkness which symbolized the darkness of the world as it was before Christ.

Then a flame was kindled. And from it a large candle, or torch, was lit and was carried into the midst of the congregation there in the pitch-dark atrium. This represented not only the pillar of fire which led the Hebrews on the night of the Exodus from Egypt but also the light of Christ entering the darkness of the fallen world.

Next a series of twelve lessons, or “Prophecies,” from the Jewish scriptures were read. They began with the story of Creation and included the account of Noah’s Ark at the time of the Flood as well as the crossing of the Red Sea and the entrance into the Promised Land across the Jordan River.

Then came the blessing of the water in the impluvium (the pool in the center of the atrium). The great Paschal, or Easter, Candle was dipped into the water three times to symbolize that it was to be a womb out of which new life would come.

The candidates for Baptism were exorcised and declared to be off-limits to the devil. Then they renounced the three things which correspond to the three temptations which Jesus rejected in the wilderness following his own baptism.

- They renounced the sinful desires of the flesh. That is they promised not to let their appetites rule them.
- They renounced the vain pomps and glories of this wicked world. That is they promised not to let what other people think rule them.
- They renounced the devil and all his work. That is they promised not to seek power over others.

Then their old clothes were removed and put aside to be burned.

Next they were led down into the water of the impluvium and asked three questions:

- Do you believe in God the Father, the creator of heaven and earth? When they said yes, they were baptized in the name of the Father.

This brought them up to date as Jews — they had crossed the Jordan River into the Holy Land.

- Do you believe in Jesus the Messiah, his only Son, who was born of the Virgin Mary? When they said yes, they were baptized in the name of the Son.

This took them on through the Birth, Life, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus.

- Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? When they said yes, they were baptized in the name of the Holy Spirit.

And this brought them up through Easter night when Jesus had breathed on the disciples and given them the Holy Spirit, as well as on through his Ascension.

But still they, like the first disciples right after the Ascension, also needed to be “endowed with power from on high.”

So after they had been dried off and dressed in new garments, they were anointed with oil and then led to the bishop. Then the bishop laid his hands on their heads and prayed for the Holy Spirit to come down upon them just as he had upon the first disciples at Pentecost.

Thus they were born again “of water and of the Holy Spirit,” baptized with the Holy Spirit and with the fire of Pentecost. [Matthew 3:11, Luke 3:16]

And then, when they received Holy Communion for the first time, along with the consecrated Bread and Wine they were given a spoonful of a mixture of milk and honey to symbolize they had entered into the true “Promised Land,” the land “flowing with milk and honey.”

Since this was just the beginning of their lives as Christians, the milk and honey also represented “formula,” baby food.

THE ACT OF GOD IN BAPTISM

Jesus said, “The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.” [John 3:8]

The first Christians believed that God had taken the initiative in their salvation from the very beginning. And they considered it to be only reasonable for their children to be baptized as soon as they were born, just as Jesus had been circumcised, presented in the Temple, and redeemed with a sacrifice when he was only eight days old.

Baptism-and-Confirmation is something done by God, through the Church, to the person.

It is not something the person does, although, if he has reached the age of discretion, it is some-

thing he chooses and asks for.

In the case of infants, the Church supplies a set of spare parents. This is to make sure that the child grows up with the cultural heritage that all Christians need. They are called *godparents*.

In the case of adult converts, rather than godparents, there are *sponsors* to vouch for the good faith and sincerity of the candidates. In the early centuries of the Church's history, the sponsors also served to make sure the candidates were not spies and infiltrators.

Even the newly baptized-and-confirmed infant received Holy Communion, because they took seriously our Lord's words: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." [John 6:53, 54]

THE UNITY OF BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION

At the time the New Testament was written, Baptism and Confirmation, except in emergencies, was one service. So when the word "baptize" is used in the New Testament in reference to Christian initiation after Pentecost, unless we are told otherwise, it includes Confirmation.

But in the third and fourth centuries, the priest (presbyter, elder) became the actual pastor of the congregation and the bishop was no longer able to be present in every congregation at Easter. This confronted the Church with a dilemma: Baptism could be done by any Christian, but Confirmation could only be done by the Bishop. So something would have to be changed.

To adapt to that situation, the western Church—from Italy, on west—chose to have the priest do the water part, which we now call Baptism, and then wait until the visit of the bishop for the laying on of hands, which we now call "Confirmation".

The Church in the east chose to have the priest baptize *and* then anoint the person's head with oil which the bishop had blessed for the purpose.

There are advantages and disadvantages to both systems. It is highly desirable that the two parts happen together. It is also desirable that the bishop preside and take part.

But we don't seem to be able to have it both ways. Yet neither way seems to be ideal.

At any rate, the Anglican Communion and the Episcopal Church have inherited the western solution. So what usually happens is that the priest baptizes and then the bishop confirms when he makes his visitation.

THE EFFECT OF BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION

Baptism-and-Confirmation guarantees these three things:

- That you are loved and accepted by God the Father;
- That you are the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ;

- That you have the Holy Spirit.

In Baptism, a person receives forgiveness for all the sins he has ever committed, and he is delivered from the *eternal* consequences of them. He is not, however, delivered from the *temporal* consequences, because the old habits remain, even though they have been repented of.

Since he is going to receive forgiveness, a person should prepare for Baptism by self examination, confession of his sins, and the determination to lead a new life in Christ according to God's will.

Those baptized as infants, when they reach the age of discretion, should prepare for Confirmation in the same way.

THE TWO STAGE PROCESS

There are striking parallels between natural birth and birth into the Body of Christ. For example:

Both occur in two steps or stages.

- In natural birth, first the child leaves the womb but continues to get his oxygen and his nourishment from his mother through the umbilical cord. The second step comes when he starts breathing and nursing at his mother's breast.
- Baptism is like the first step. Coming out of the water is like coming out of the womb, which is also a bag of water. Confirmation is like the second step. The gift of the Spirit is like the first breath, and first communion is like beginning to nurse.

The Holy Spirit is the active agent in both steps.

We can see this same two-step pattern in the New Testament:

- Jesus had been conceived by the Holy Spirit. [Matthew 1:18; Luke 1:35]

And yet when he began his public ministry, the Holy Spirit came down upon him at the River Jordan . [Matthew 3:16; Mark 1:10, Luke 3:22; John 1:33,34] And it drove him out into the wilderness to face down Satan. Then "he returned in the *power* of the Spirit into Galilee." [Luke 4:14]

- The twelve disciples had been with Jesus throughout his ministry and had received the Holy Spirit when he breathed on them and gave them authority to forgive sins. Till that moment they were spiritually dead, and Jesus brought them back to a new life.

But they did not show any sign of acting as his apostles during the entire next fifty days. In fact, just before his Ascension, Jesus said to them "Behold I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." [Luke 24:49]

The second step for the apostles came on the Jewish feast of Pentecost, fifty days after the

Passover. They were assembled in the upper room in Jerusalem waiting for the power which Jesus had promised, when suddenly it seemed as if there were a hurricane inside that room. And they could also see flames dancing about over their heads.

They were filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and rushed out into the street and shouted the news of God's mighty acts to all the foreign pilgrims there for the feast of Pentecost. And they did it in the various languages of the pilgrims, even though they didn't know those languages.

- In Samaria, there were some people who had been converted and had been baptized but had not received the Holy Spirit. The second step for them occurred when the apostles sent Peter and John there to lay their hands on them. And then they received the Holy Spirit. [Acts 8:14]
- When Paul came to Ephesus, he found some disciples who had received only the baptism of John the Baptist and had not received the Holy Spirit. So they were baptized in the name of Jesus. And then the second step occurred when Paul laid his hand on them and they received the Holy Spirit. [Acts 19:1f]

THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The power of the Holy Spirit which came down on him after his baptism enabled Jesus to do all the mighty works which God had in store for him.

And it was only after the apostles had received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that they were able to act with power. Then Peter and the others preached with power and healed the sick.

At first it seems that when one received the laying on of hands, certain dramatic things happened. It was usual, and expected, that the result would be the outpouring of prayer in a language which no one understood, including the one doing the praying. This gave assurance to them that they had received the Holy Spirit.

But before long, that ceased to be the usual result of the laying on of hands. And also there was less need for it, because they had begun experiencing more important fruits of the Spirit. As the Gospel spread, the Church could see the Holy Spirit working through it in many dramatic ways.

In our own day, God seems to be giving that kind of subjective assurance to many people who need and want it.

Nevertheless, praying in tongues is not exactly the same thing as what happened on the day of Pentecost. Because that involved miraculous communication.

But speaking in tongues is not a form of communication with other people. And sometimes it is an occasion of confusion and disruption.

That seems to have been the situation in the Church in Corinth, because in the 14th chapter of his First Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul talks about the problems it can cause. Everything — even tongues — must be tested, he says, by whether or not it builds up the Body of Christ.

THE GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The gifts of the Holy Spirit are usually said to be seven in number. The prophet Isaiah said of the Messiah, “The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord...with righteousness will he judge the poor...” [Isaiah 11:2,4]

The seven gifts of the Holy Spirit are usually interpreted as follows:

1. *Wisdom* to know and love God;
2. *Understanding* of what God has done and is doing in the lives of his people;
3. *Counsel* to know God’s will;
4. *Strength* to carry it out;
5. *Knowledge* of the true faith of the Church ;
6. *Holy Fear* of breaking God’s love;
7. *Godliness* in life and character.

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Holy Spirit is given for the building up of the Body of Christ, as St. Paul says. And throughout the Bible, what the Holy Spirit does characteristically is to “make” Jesus.

The first Christians found themselves acting in a way in which they could not have done before — in charity, in peace. Thus they recognized in themselves the same Spirit that was in Jesus.

St. John says, “If we love one another, God abides in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit.” [I John 4:12,13]

Members of the Church on earth are still sinners (*sinner anonymous*, as it were). But in Baptism-and-Confirmation, *we* have received the power of God to love *them*,...and the privilege.

And when *we* sin, *they* have the power of God to love us...and the privilege.

We love because God first loved us, and we know *that* through the cross of Jesus Christ.

Our loving each other while the other is still a sinner is what overcomes sin and also makes us into lovers, thus building up the Body of Christ.

Confirmation gives one a “holy temptation” ... the temptation to love. The only reason we fail to love is that we do not yield to the Spirit of God.

Furthermore, in a very real sense, God has given to his whole Church, including you, the power to forgive sins. It works this way:

When you, in the power of the Spirit, love another sinner and forgive him his sins against you, that person experiences the same forgiving love from God, *through you*, that you received from God when you were baptized. So your forgiving love makes God's forgiving love an event on earth.

Baptism-and-Confirmation is the beginning of the process of salvation, not its completion.

It gives us a status, a relationship, with God, however, that makes us all free to face ourselves without fear and, with God's help, to "grow into perfect men, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." [Ephesians 4:13]

PREPARATIONS FOR BAPTISM

When a child is to be baptized, the first thing you should do, before you choose godparents or decide when it is to be done, is to talk to the priest.

The minimum requirement is that there be at least one godparent. And that person must himself have been baptized.

However, it is desirable that there be three godparents, two of them of the same sex as the child.

The godparents make certain solemn vows in their own names, as well as in the name of the child. Because of the nature of those promises, it is difficult to see how non-catholic Christians can make such commitments.

So godparents should be Episcopalians, or, at the very least, they should be Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Old Catholic.

Furthermore, the godparents are intended to serve as role-models for the child. So the godparents' own relationship to the Church is going to be very important.

Finally, the priest is required by the Church to "instruct the parents and the godparents in the meaning of Baptism, in their duties to help the new Christians grow in the knowledge and love of God, and in their responsibilities as members of his Church." [BCP, p. 298]

JESUS'S BAPTISM [See Lecture # 6]

As Jesus was about to begin his public ministry, his cousin, John the Baptist, burst on the scene. John proclaimed that the time to repent had come and that the one chosen by God to deliver them was ready to appear in response to their repentance.

To dramatize his message he called the multitudes to come down to the Jordan River and take a bath (be baptized) at the same place where Joshua had led them into the Promised Land.

In effect, he had them go out of the Promised Land and come in again. They were thus acting out their confession that they had made a mess of their former life in the land God had given them. In effect, he had symbolically collected the nation at the Jordan River to await a new Joshua to lead them in.

Then Jesus, whose name in Hebrew is Joshua, showed up, and he insisted that John include him in the baptism also, even though John said he did not need it.

As Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove. And there came a voice from heaven which said, "Thou art my beloved Son, with thee I am well pleased."

Then the Holy Spirit drove him out into the Judaeian desert to face down Satan and his temptations.

At the time of Jesus, the Jews believed there were three things the Messiah would do. Those three things corresponded to the three temptations in the wilderness to which Jesus said, "No."

In each case, Jesus's answer was a quotation from Deuteronomy, referring to the Hebrews' time in the desert under Moses.

The First Temptation: Turn stones into bread, that is, lead an economic revolution and end poverty.

Jesus's answer is, "Man does not live by bread alone." [Deut. 8:3]

The Second Temptation: Jump off the Temple, that is, sweep the people off their feet, produce spectacles, and bring them glory.

Jesus's answer is "Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God" [Deut. 6:16]

The Third Temptation: Worship Satan and in return receive the kingdoms of this world, that is, lead a revolution against Rome, conquer the world, and force all the nations to obey the Law of Moses.

Jesus's answer is, "Get thee hence, Satan, for it is written, thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve." [Deut. 6:13]

THE BAPTISMAL RENUNCIATIONS

The three renunciations by Jesus correspond to the three renunciations at baptism in the Episcopal Church. The godparents make them in the name of the child as well as in their own.

Question Dost thou renounce all sinful desires that draw thee from the love of God?

Answer I renounce them all.

[I will not let **my desires/appetites** rule my life instead of God.]

Question Dost thou renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the

creatures of God?

[1928 BCP: "...the vain pomps and glories of this wicked world"]

Answer I renounce them all.

[I will not let **what others think** rule my life instead of God]

Question Dost thou renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?

Answer I renounce them all.

[I will not seek to **gain power** to have my own way instead of God's way.]

Question Dost thou turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as thy Savior?

Answer I do.

Question Dost thou put thy whole trust in his grace and love?

Answer I do.

Question Dost thou promise to follow and obey him as thy Lord and Master?

Answer I do.

[*The Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, p. 303]

THE BAPTISMAL COVENANT

Those adults being baptized then make the following promises.

The godparents make them in their own names, as well as in the name of the child.

- They promise to continue in the **Apostles' doctrine**; that is, they promise to know and believe and live by the Catholic Faith which is summed up in the creeds.
- They promise to continue in the **Apostles' fellowship**; that is, they promise to stay in communion with the bishops of the Church Catholic.
- They promise to continue in the **Breaking of Bread**; that is they promise to take part on a weekly basis in the eucharistic worship of the Church.
- They promise to continue in the **Prayers**; that is, they promise to join their prayers with the prayers of the whole Church, on a regular and frequent basis, both publicly and privately.

BAPTISM AND CONFIRMATION

Then the candidates are washed three times, once each in the Name of **The Father; and of The Son; and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

As soon as feasible, the new Christians are confirmed and receive the Holy Spirit to enable them to live the New Life in Christ

Then they receive Holy Communion for the first time, which should happen as soon after baptism as possible.