

Baptism – Epiphany Lecture 5

We have come to my last lecture in our Christian Orthodoxy series and it takes us right back to the beginning. Today we are going to talk about Baptism, the initiation rite that is meant to be the threshold to a life lived in the Christian faith. I need to thank Dr. Ruth Meyers of the Church Divinity School of the Pacific for sharing an unpublished paper that gave me a great deal of the background for this talk.

The Christian tradition adopted a tradition of baptism that it is safe to say it first encountered in John the Baptist. As a Jewish 1 c. prophet John would have known of the ritual washing for conversion to Judaism as well as those required for purification. He says in the gospels, “I baptize you with water, the one who comes after me will baptize you with fire.”

That image ties directly to the imagery of Pentecost, when tongues of fire descended on the disciples and allowed them to speak in tongues. So when we consider baptism we need to consider both water and the Holy Spirit.

By medieval times, two separate initiation rites had evolved, both of which were considered sacraments by the Roman Catholic Church. These are baptism and confirmation, baptism tied to water and confirmation aligned with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. How many of you have gone through confirmation in a church, either Episcopal or another denomination?

How many as children were not able to take communion until you had gone through confirmation? In fact in every prayer book from 1549 until 1979 it was stated clearly, ““And there shall none be admitted to the Holy Communion, until such time as he be confirmed, or ready and desirous to be confirmed.”

But a major change came with the 1979 book. It now read, “Holy Baptism is full initiation by water and the Holy Spirit into Christ’s Body, the Church.”

By the time this change came about, there had been a number of major changes in how baptism was viewed and practiced in Christianity.

The earliest extra-biblical directions for baptism, which occur in the worship manual we talked about before called the Didache explained the process

for baptizing adults. The earliest reference to infant baptism was by Irenaeus in his work *Against Heresies* written around 180 AD. Three passages by Origen a few years later mention infant baptism as traditional and customary. The *Apostolic Tradition*, sometimes attributed to Hippolytus of Rome who died in 235, describes how to perform the ceremony of baptism; it states that children were baptised first, and if any of them could not answer for themselves, their parents or someone else from their family was to answer for them.

By the fourth and fifth centuries, baptism had come to be centered on the Easter Vigil, with Lent as the season when adults were instructed in preparation. On that night they were taken to the baptistry where the bishop consecrated the water offered prayers. The catechumens as they were called disrobed, were anointed with oil, renounced the devil and his works, confessed their faith in the Trinity, and were immersed in the font. They were then anointed with chrism, received the laying on of hands, clothed in white, and led to join the congregation in the Easter celebration, taking communion for the first time.

So infants most likely were baptized from the earliest days of the church as attested by the early Church fathers I mentioned as well accounts in the Bible. We see several instances in the Book of Acts when entire households are baptized, which would most likely include children. As Christianity spread, large bodies of new adult converts were baptized, and after Constantine made Christianity the state religion we enter the period we call Christendom. Christianity became normative and families began to present their children for baptism and Infant baptism became normative. As a response, the rite of confirmation developed, part two of the initiation rite. This was firmly in place at the time of the first prayer book in 1549.

Those early prayer books called for baptism to be administered at Morning or Evening Prayer on a Sunday or holy day, quote “when the most number of people may come together,” so that the congregation might witness the incorporation of a new member of the Church and might remember their own baptisms. But the prayer books of the Episcopal Church eliminated the rationale for public baptism and relaxed the stipulation about Sunday baptism, omitting the phrase “when the most number of people come together” and allowing the minister to appoint a

day other than a Sunday or holy day. It became common in the Episcopal Church for baptism to be administered on a Sunday afternoon with only family and perhaps a few friends gathered just like we heard in some of our stories.

Okay, remember the Oxford Movement and the liturgical renewal movement? Just as they sought to re-discover ancient practices for the Eucharist, they searched back for primitive practices of baptism. And a leader in this effort was the dean of Berkeley Divinity School in Connecticut which later merged with Yale from where I graduated.

In the late 1930s, this dean, William Palmer Ladd, started writing a column that introduced Episcopalians to the ideas of the liturgical renewal movement.

While the primary emphasis of this movement was restoration of a weekly Sunday eucharist with the people receiving, Ladd focused on baptism. Drawing upon newly discovered and translated patristic sources, Ladd highlighted the ancient celebration of baptism at the Easter Vigil and encouraged a more public celebration of baptism. Over the next three decades, other church leaders also called for the celebration of baptism in the presence of the congregation, recommended a more abundant use of water, and urged substantive preparation of parents and godparents of infant candidates. This was not an official program of the Episcopal Church but rather a grassroots movement. Alongside these changes, liturgical scholars continued to fill in the picture of patristic baptismal practice. In contrast to the mid twentieth-century use of baptism as a family occasion marking the birth of a child with the sprinkling of a few drops of water, baptism in the early church was a celebration rich with symbol and ritual drama. As was rediscovered, we now know adult candidates prepared for their baptism during a lengthy catechumenate that culminated at the Easter Vigil, a liturgy that included not only full immersion but also anointing and laying on of hands, and concluded with the newly baptized participating in the eucharist with the congregation. New understandings of the power of baptism in the early church encouraged twentieth-century liturgical leaders as they worked for the recovery of the significance of baptism.

The 1979 Prayer Book calls for baptism to be administered “within the Eucharist at the chief service on a Sunday or other feast” (p.

298) and further recommends that baptism be reserved for baptismal feasts (Easter Vigil, Pentecost, All Saints' Day or the Sunday after All Saints', and the Baptism of Jesus on the first Sunday after the Epiphany), as well as the visit of a bishop.

This combined with the statement about baptism being full initiation, meant that beginning in 1979 our church had an entirely new way of considering and conceiving of baptism. Ruth Meyers, probably our leading active liturgy scholar said,

“the only text they kept from earlier prayer books was the baptismal formula, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Everything else was newly written or reworded substantially. The development of the 1979 rite reflects major shifts in Episcopalians' understanding and practice of baptism.”

The main victim of this change was the rite of Confirmation. Anglicans such as Arthur James Mason and Gregory Dix had argued that baptism in water was a preliminary rite, effecting forgiveness of sin and requiring completion through the bestowal of the Spirit in confirmation. But Geoffrey Lampe and others insisted that initiation, including the bestowal of the Holy Spirit, was complete in baptism. This opinion won out.

By the time of the 1979 prayer book there was a growing scholarly consensus that initiation in the early church was accomplished in the single act of baptism. Two additions to the baptism prayer supplant the need for confirmation as a sign of the Holy Spirit rather than simply the sign of water. This comes when we anoint the newly baptized with oil with the words “you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever.” Secondly, after the baptism with water and the anointing with oil, the gifts of the Holy Spirit given to the newly baptized are enumerated in what is one of my favorite prayers in the prayer book:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy

Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.

The Holy Spirit elements of Confirmation are now fully included in rite of Baptism itself. So what has become of confirmation? Confirmation has been called “a rite in search of a theology” for good reason, especially with our new Baptismal rite.

We do hedge our bets a little bit. Confirmation survives in the Episcopal Church primarily as a way to tie the entire community to the office of our bishop as a primary symbol of Christian unity. So we define baptism as “full initiation by water and the Spirit,” but then as it says on page 412 in the prayer book we expect that adults, “unless baptized with laying on of hands by a bishop make a public affirmation of faith in the presence of the bishop and receive the laying on of hands by the bishop.” So is baptism full initiation or is it not? The addition of this rubric, it turns out, was an eleventh-hour addition, inserted by the House of Bishops (with the subsequent approval of the House of Deputies) as the Prayer Book was first being approved at the 1976 General Convention. It serves to remind Episcopalians of the significance attached by many to the ritual connection with a bishop.

For Episcopalians, confirmation, though not a sacrament of initiation, is a gateway to additional responsibilities and privileges of membership. The canons require a person to be a “confirmed adult communicant in good standing” to hold a number of elected or appointed offices and to be ordained. In adopting this language the Episcopal Church hedged its bets and appears to be introducing a different level of membership. It is still a little muddy, but much has changed in how we understand Baptism and the language we use when we perform baptisms.

What we learned with the Eucharist is just as true for Baptism. The impact of the scholarship and practice of the liturgical renewal

movement beginning over 150 years ago has resulted in a combination of new and ancient practices.

In terms of what is brand-new, I want to close by talking about my favorite innovation. It was conceived and written by the Prayer book revision committee and then included in our baptismal service. To date this is found in our baptism service alone. We call it The Baptismal Covenant.

As was done for centuries, we affirm our faith in the baptismal rite through the repetition of the Apostles Creed in a call and response form showing what we believe. That isn't new. But what is brand new is the addition of five new questions that make a public witness to what we commit to do in response to our belief.

The creed assures Orthodoxy; these questions assure what I call Orthopraxy or Right Practice. You are probably familiar with them:

Celebrant Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?

People I will, with God's help.

Celebrant Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

People I will, with God's help.

Today as Christians, in baptism we commit ourselves not only to the right beliefs but in response to our belief to the right actions on behalf of our faith. I think this is a great gift to the wider church and I hope other Christian denominations will incorporate it into their Baptismal rites.

I'll stop there and thank you all for the opportunity to offer these five sessions on Christian Orthodoxy. It has really helped me focus my learning and beliefs and I hope it has done the same for you.