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EARLY CHRISTIAN WORSHIP

A basic introduction to ideas and practice

Second edition

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SPCK

First published in Great Britain in 1996

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST
www.spckpublishing.co.uk

Reprinted twice
Second edition published 2010

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978–0–281–06345–1

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by MPG Books Group

Produced on paper from sustainable forests

Contents

Acknowledgements and abbreviations

Where some of the following translations of ancient writings use non-inclusive language with regard to human beings, they have been amended in the extracts cited in this book. Any translations not otherwise attributed are the work of the author.

AIR Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation*, 2nd edition. Copyright 1994 T & T Clark, Edinburgh.

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Introduction

It is a sign of the extent of the continuing research that has taken place into the history of early Christian worship by myself and others in the 15 years since I originally wrote this book that scarcely any chapter has been left unchanged in this revised edition. Although in some cases the adjustments have been relatively minor, in others extensive rewriting has had to be done, so differently do many scholars now interpret the evidence that was presented there.

Originally commissioned as an undergraduate textbook for the University of South Africa and then offered to a wider audience, this little work aims not merely to describe *what* rites Christians performed during the first few centuries of the Church's existence but also to explain *why* they did them: What caused them to choose those particular liturgical forms instead of others? What did they understand themselves to be doing in their worship? What effect did that have on the development of Christian doctrine? And how did new doctrinal formulations in turn affect the character of the rites? If readers keep these questions in mind as they go through each chapter, they should have little difficulty in finding the answers in the text.

In such a small volume it has not been possible to deal with the subject in great detail, but suggestions are included for further reading for those who wish to go further, and more extensive background to the sources and methods used in the study of early Christian liturgy can be found in the second edition of my book, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship* (SPCK, London, and Oxford University Press, New York 2002).

Paul Bradshaw

Part 1

CHRISTIAN INITIATION

In this section we shall first examine the roots of Christian baptismal thought and practice in New Testament times, and then see how different elements of this were picked up and developed in various early Christian traditions, concentrating principally on the contrasts between Syria and North Africa, before going on to look at the movement towards a more common baptismal theology and liturgy in the fourth century. We shall end our survey by considering the effects that the later spread of infant baptism had on both the practice and understanding of Christian initiation.

Suggestions for further reading

In addition to works cited in notes, the following are recommended:

Paul F. Bradshaw, *Reconstructing Early Christian Worship* (SPCK, London 2009), chapters 4–6.

Maxwell E. Johnson, *The Rites of Christian Initiation* (2nd edn, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 2007), chapters 1–5.

Bryan D. Spinks, *Early and Medieval Rituals and Theologies of Baptism* (Ashgate, Aldershot 2006), chapters 1–3.

1

Beginnings

Jesus apparently did not leave his followers with a fixed set of doctrines but rather with an experience that changed their lives, which they then tried to articulate in their own ways. As a result, what we find in the New Testament is not one standard theology of baptism or a systematized explanation of what it means to become a Christian, but a variety of ways of speaking about that experience, quite different images and metaphors being employed by different writers in their attempts to communicate it to others.

Antecedents

The New Testament implies that the custom of baptizing those who were converted to the Christian faith was derived from John the Baptist (see, for example, Matthew 3.1–12), but the source of his own practice is uncertain. Some scholars have argued that it was based on the ablutions of the Jewish Essene community at Qumran, but these were repeated washings related to the need for constant ritual purity and do not seem to have included an initiatory baptism. Others have suggested that John was influenced by the practice of baptizing new converts to Judaism, but there is some doubt whether this was being done in his time or whether it was only adopted at a later date. A third possibility is that it arose out of the Israelite traditions of ritual purification (see, for example, Leviticus 15.5–13) and/or of prophetic symbolism, which had spoken of God's people being cleansed with pure water in preparation for the advent of the messianic age (see, for example, Ezekiel 36.2–8).

Whether the Christian adoption of baptism began with Jesus himself or only in the Church after his resurrection cannot easily be resolved. All three synoptic Gospels record Jesus' own baptism by John but say nothing of him baptizing his followers. The Gospel of John, on the other hand, does not mention Jesus being baptized but

does speak of him baptizing others (John 3.22, 26; 4.1; but cf. 4.2). Matthew 28.19–20 contains a command to baptize all nations, but there are difficulties in accepting this as an authentic saying of the risen Lord.

Baptismal practice

Whatever its origins, however, it appears that at least in certain Christian communities from early times it became the custom to initiate new converts into the Church through a process which included baptism in water. Unfortunately, the New Testament offers very few clues as to the manner in which the baptisms might have been carried out. The preference for the use of 'living' (i.e. naturally flowing) water that is found in some later sources (see also John 7.38) suggests that they may at first have usually been performed in a river or pool, where possible, rather than in a domestic bath-house. The image of baptism as participation in the death and resurrection of Christ used by Paul (see Romans 6.3ff.) seems naturally to imply that candidates would have been totally submerged in the water, but such a practice would certainly not have been easily possible in domestic baths, and the custom found later in some places of candidates standing in a shallow font and having water poured all over them may also have existed in the earliest times. Both methods involved total immersion in water – it was only the way of achieving it that differed.

What else besides the actual immersion might have been involved is not made explicit in the New Testament. We would expect there to have been a preliminary period of instruction in the faith, at least in the case of Gentile candidates who lacked the religious background possessed by Jewish converts, but this need not have been the extensive formal catechumenate (from the Greek word *catechumen*, 'learner') found in later centuries. Several New Testament passages speak of baptism being 'in the name of Jesus' (see, for example, Acts 2.38), which suggests that his name was invoked in some way during the ceremony. This could have been in the form of a statement made over the candidate (e.g. 'I baptize you in the name of . . .'), such as we find in later Syrian usage, but it need not necessarily have been restricted to that. It could also have referred to some confession of faith in Jesus made by the candidate at the moment of baptism, such as we find in later Western sources. At the very least, it seems

probable that some sort of ritual dialogue would have preceded the immersion. Acts 2.38 refers to the necessity for repentance to accompany baptism, and this would surely have needed to be expressed verbally. Similarly, Acts 8.37, although found only in certain manuscripts of the text, seems to embody the sort of profession of faith that candidates in some places would have made prior to baptism: 'I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.'

'Confirmation' in the New Testament?

Some scholars have argued that in New Testament times the immersion in water was regularly followed within the same ceremony by a separate ritual gesture expressing the gift of the Holy Spirit, either in the form of the imposition of hands on the newly baptized or by an anointing with oil, and that this constitutes the biblical foundation of the later practice of 'confirmation'. They point to such passages as Matthew 3.16, Mark 1.10, and Luke 3.22, where Jesus receives the Holy Spirit immediately after his baptism; to Acts 8.14–17, where Peter and John lay their hands on the Samaritans baptized by Philip and they receive the Holy Spirit; to Acts 19.1–7, where baptism is followed by the imposition of Paul's hands and the reception of the Holy Spirit; to Hebrews 6.2, which mentions 'the laying on of hands' directly after 'ablutions'; to 2 Corinthians 1.22, Ephesians 1.13 and 4.30, where Christians are spoken of as having been sealed with the Holy Spirit; to Revelation 7.3, which speaks of the servants of God being sealed upon their foreheads; and to 1 John 2.20 and 27, which refer to an anointing by the Holy One that the readers have received.

Other scholars, however, have contested this interpretation of the passages. They argue that the descriptions of Jesus' baptism do not necessarily mirror the ritual structure of early Christian baptisms, and the two narratives in Acts may not describe the regular form of Christian initiation but instead be accounts of unusual situations: the mission of the Hellenists in Samaria had to be endorsed by the Jerusalem apostles, and the disciples of John needed baptism in the name of Jesus in order to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. We need to remember that Acts also describes the gift of the Spirit as preceding the act of immersion in the case of the baptism of the household of Cornelius (Acts 10.44–48). Since this episode is usually interpreted as being an exceptional situation, symbolizing a Gentile equivalent

of the Pentecost experience (Acts 2.1–4), rather than a description of standard initiatory practice, why should the same not be true of the other baptismal accounts? As for the other New Testament references cited above, that in Hebrews is too vague to allow any firm conclusions to be drawn about baptismal practice, and the various allusions to 'sealing' and 'anointing' may not be reflections of actual liturgical ceremonies but instead merely vivid metaphors for what was thought to have happened inwardly to those who became Christians.

Thus, at best, the New Testament evidence is inconclusive with regard to any post-baptismal ceremonies. Moreover, the theory that the imposition of hands was a standard element in first-century practice becomes still less credible when we take into account the testimony of the later liturgical traditions. As we shall see in subsequent chapters, while North African and Roman sources certainly do seem to have known a post-baptismal anointing and imposition of hands, the early Syrian practice apparently did not include any post-baptismal ceremonies at all, although it was familiar with a pre-baptismal anointing. This later diversity suggests that the whole idea of the existence of a uniform baptismal ritual in primitive Christianity is misconceived. While it is possible that some communities may have practised an anointing and/or imposition of hands from early times, it does not look as if all followed that custom, still less that there was some apostolic directive so to do – or else we would be at a loss to explain the subsequent Syrian departure from that norm. We cannot even say with total certainty that immersion in water was the one universal element in Christian initiation rites from the beginning. Again, it is possible that immersion was originally limited only to certain groups, with others perhaps having different practices, some of which – such as anointing or foot-washing – may have survived as ancillary rites to water baptism in the more standardized initiation process of later centuries.

Baptismal images and metaphors

The language and images used about baptism by the New Testament writers further support the idea that there were variations in liturgical practice from place to place. For what we find here is not a standardized baptismal theology shared by all Christians but a range of different ways of interpreting and expressing what was thought to

happen when a person became a Christian. Hebrews 6.4 and 10.32, for instance, speaks of the baptized as having been 'illuminated'. The same image underlies the statement in 1 Peter 2.9 that God has 'called you out of darkness into his marvellous light'; and it recurs, as we shall see in a later chapter, in the description of baptism in the second-century writer Justin Martyr. John 3, on the other hand, uses instead the metaphor of rebirth by water and Spirit; a similar concept also appears in Titus 3.5, which speaks of 'the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit'; and once again this idea is picked up by Justin Martyr. In the Acts of the Apostles, the emphasis falls instead on the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit, as, for example, in Acts 2.38: 'And Peter said to them, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."'

By contrast to these ways of speaking, in Paul's baptismal theology the primary image seems to have been union with Christ through participation in his death and resurrection (see especially Romans 6.2ff.; Colossians 2.12). But he also makes use of other metaphors. As I have mentioned earlier, he speaks of Christians as having been sealed as God's people: '[God] has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee' (2 Corinthians 1.22). The same image recurs in the Epistle to the Ephesians, where the readers are said to have been 'sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, which is the guarantee of our inheritance' (1.13–14; see also 4.30); and a similar theme is found in Revelation 7.30, which speaks of the servants of God being sealed upon their foreheads. This metaphor seems to be derived from commerce, where a seal authenticated a change of ownership: Christians were once slaves to sin, but now they have been marked as belonging instead to God (see Romans 6.16–23), and the Holy Spirit constitutes, as it were, the 'deposit' which guarantees that the transaction will be brought to completion when Christ returns.

Galatians 3.27 offers what seems to be yet another metaphorical image, that of baptism as being clothed in a new garment, since it describes the baptized as having 'put on Christ'; and Colossians 3.9–10 and Ephesians 4.22–24 speak of putting off the old nature and putting on the new. There is also a similar eschatological picture in 2 Corinthians 5.2–3, which talks of the longing 'to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that . . . we may not be found naked'. Such language may well have arisen as a result of baptismal candidates stripping off their

clothes and going down naked into the water and then dressing again when they emerged from it. Although we have no first-century testimony that this was then the usual practice, it is well attested in later sources. To these citations, we may perhaps add the references in Mark's Gospel to the young man at the arrest of Jesus who left the linen cloth he was wearing and ran away naked (14.51–52) and of the young man sitting on the right side of the empty tomb, dressed in a white robe (16.5). It has been suggested by some that this pair of stories was intended as a baptismal image, and that is certainly an attractive interpretation of passages which have often puzzled commentators. It is interesting to observe that fourth-century sources speak of the newly baptized not just putting back on their former garments, but being clothed in white robes. Could this practice possibly go back to New Testament times, or is it – as seems more likely – a much later development that was encouraged by such texts as Revelation 7.9–14, which describes the countless multitude wearing robes washed white in the blood of the Lamb?

Finally, we should note that the image of being 'anointed' with the Holy Spirit found in 1 John 2.20 and 27 arose out of a different concept from that of being 'sealed' with the Spirit used in the Pauline writings. In Israelite tradition both kings and priests had been anointed when they were appointed, as a sign that they had been chosen by God. For example, in 1 Samuel 16.1–13 the prophet Samuel anoints David as king 'and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward' (v. 13). The term 'Messiah' itself means in Hebrew 'the anointed one', which was translated into Greek as *Christos*, Christ; and so it is hardly surprising that early Christian writers thought of Jesus as having been anointed by God with the Holy Spirit (see Luke 4.16; Acts 4.27; Acts 10.38) or at least as having received God's Spirit at his baptism (Matthew 3.16; Mark 1.10; Luke 3.22). Since they believed that Christians at their baptism received the same Holy Spirit, it was but a small step to think that they, too, were being anointed as Jesus had been. The idea that Christians constituted a 'royal priesthood' (1 Peter 2.9; see also 2.5) or a kingdom of priests (cf. Revelation 1.6; see also 5.10), which was derived from Exodus 19.6, would also have contributed to seeing baptism as anointing. Both these images led quite naturally to the adoption of a literal anointing with oil as a baptismal ceremony, such as we find in later sources.

2

Syria and Egypt

Syria

Our sources of information for baptismal practice in the early Syrian tradition are rather sparse, but enough to enable us to piece together a rough outline of how Christian initiation was performed and understood there in the second and third centuries.

The *Didache*

Chapter 7 of the ancient church order known as the *Didache*, or 'Teaching of the Twelve Apostles', paints a very simple picture:

> Concerning baptism, baptize thus: having first recounted all these things, baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living water; if you do not have living water, baptize in other water; if you cannot in cold, then in warm; if you do not have either, pour water three times on the head in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Before the baptism let the baptizer and the one to be baptized and any others who can fast; you shall instruct the one to be baptized to fast one or two [days] before.

Scholars have found it difficult to date the *Didache* precisely, but usually place its compilation somewhere between the second half of the first century and the first half of the second century. These instructions suggest that the normal pattern of Christian initiation consisted of a period of instruction and fasting, by both candidate and at least some members of the Christian community, followed by immersion in running water accompanied by the recitation of the name of the Trinity. This trinitarian formula may be a later addition to the text and the original version may have simply been baptism in the name of the Lord.[1] Nevertheless, the formula is reminiscent

[1] There is also a passage in the apocryphal *Acts of Paul* where Thecla immerses herself in water, saying, 'In the name of Jesus Christ I baptize myself . . .', which

of Matthew 28.19–20 ('Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you'); and whenever they were written, both passages imply that the earliest custom of invoking the name of Jesus in baptism was eventually expanded in this way, as the Church began to define its faith more fully. Other sources confirm what was intended by these references was that the one baptizing should say over the candidate: 'I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'

The main concern of the baptismal instructions in the *Didache*, however, is to make provision for occasions when it was impossible to perform the ritual in what was seen as the normal way: immersion in cold, running water. Again, this suggests the Church was undergoing a transition from an outdoor, missionary context to a more domestic situation that required some modification of its earlier practices.

The *Didascalia*

When we compare these simple directions with other early Syrian sources, however, the most striking feature is the important place that they give to a pre-baptismal anointing with oil. The third-century Syrian church order known as the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, for example, requires female deacons to be appointed in order to carry out this ministry for women candidates, and it instructs the bishop as follows:

> In the first place, when women go down into the baptismal water: those who go down into the water ought to be anointed by a deaconess with the oil of anointing; and where there is no woman to hand, and especially no deaconess, he who baptizes must of necessity anoint the woman who is being baptized. But where there is a woman, and especially a deaconess, present, it is not fitting that women should be seen by men, but with the imposition of the hand you should anoint the head only. As of old priests and kings were anointed in Israel, so do you likewise, with the imposition of the hand, anoint the head of those who receive baptism, whether it be of men or of women; and afterwards, whether you yourself baptize, or you tell the deacons

seems to point to a formula something like 'I baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ' as having been usual in early times. See J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Clarendon, Oxford 1993), p. 370.

> or presbyters to baptize, let a woman, a deaconess, anoint the women, as we have already said. But let a man pronounce over them the invocation of the divine names in the water.[2]

The *Didascalia* regards the pre-baptismal unction of the candidates' heads performed by the imposition of the bishop's hand not only as an expression of their entry into the royal priesthood of the Church (see 1 Peter 2.5 and 9; Revelation 1.6; 5.10), but as reflecting Christ's own baptism, for it says elsewhere that 'the Lord in baptism, by the imposition of hand of the bishop, bore witness to each one of you and uttered his holy voice, saying: "Thou art my son: this day have I begotten thee"' (Psalm 2.7/Luke 3.22).[3] However, it seems that it also expected that their whole bodies would be anointed as well: otherwise, there would have been no necessity for the female deacons.

The *Acts of Thomas*

We come across this same twofold unction in other Syrian texts from the same period. The third-century apocryphal *Acts of Thomas* contains several descriptions of baptisms. Two refer to an anointing of the head alone before the immersion and associate this with the Messiah (chs 27 and 132). Two others include a prayer for the blessing of the oil, mention the anointing of both the head and the whole body, and associate the action instead with healing (chs 121 and 157). A fifth account speaks explicitly only of the immersion in water, at least in the Syriac version of the text, although an allusion to the 'seal' here could be an oblique reference to anointing (ch. 49).

While it is possible to harmonize these various accounts of anointing by surmising that an unction of both head and body was presumed in every case, but only explicitly mentioned in two of them, the scholar Gabriele Winkler put forward the theory that they represent two different stages of development in the baptismal rite: the earlier practice was to anoint the head alone, as continued to be the custom in the later Armenian rite, and the anointing of the whole body was a later addition to the ritual. This explained why at first oil was poured over the head alone (this was the custom at the anointing of the kings of Israel), why the coming of the Spirit was associated with it (the Spirit

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[2] *Didascalia* 3.12; English translation from Sebastian Brock and Michael Vasey, *The Liturgical Portions of the Didascalia* (Grove Books, Nottingham 1982), p. 22.

[3] *Didascalia* 2.32.