

BAPTISM: PEDO-?ANTIPEDO-?ANA-? / ECUMENICITY

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The World Church is making rapid strides in ritual theology (i.e., how to think about baptism, Communion, and ordination). This thinksheet deals with remaining hangups on the first of these three areas. The occasion is a letter I wrote to an antipedobaptist (i.e., "Baptist") who'd inquired as to whether I could help him over the ideological hump into Anglican orders, he knowing that I (as a Baptist) made it over the same hump into Congregational-Christian (to become UCC) clergy-standing.

1. Ritual theology is the latest **adiaphoristic** controversy in Christendom: what, distinguished from essentials (*esse*), are matters of "indifference," freedom, to be decided on what's viewed as "good" (*bene esse*) for the Church's life and mission? The ordination of women, an impediment to ecumenicity, I view as an essential, taking priority over ecumenicity. Essential also is the ban against substituting targum for text: text (in Judaism and Christianity) is *written*, targum (revisionistic and "occasionalistic" rendering of the text) is *oral--down with the "Inclusive Language Lectionary" for this and other reasons*. Christians and churches must make their own list: "in nonessentials, liberty."

2. **Christian Initiation**, an ancient phrase recently revived by scholars and still more recently established in ecumenese, was and is the process/ritual of moving from "the world" into the Christian community. It involves "hearing" (thus, "catechumen") over(at first) a (lengthening)period of time, public (i.e., in a public meeting of the community) repentance/affirmation ("Jesus is Lord"), and a community act of reception (a ritual only probably always involving water: this must remain in the impenetrable haze lying over the earliest stages of Christian existence--and therefore the water question must remain an adiaphoron). (So, in the church I pastored 10½ years, we baptized all four ways: waterless, aspersion, affusion, immersion. After I taught the people scholarship's agnosticism on the matter, they took the variety as a matter of course and even of pride.)

3. **Pedobaptism** also lies in that haze: we don't and can't know when/how preconfessors (children-Christian-families, too young "to know what they're doing") were baptized (here, "baptism" means whatever ritual initiated the child into membership in the community). Controversialists on this matter use the obscure NT passages as a drunk uses a lamppost--for support, not for illumination. Some help now, perhaps, from the psychology/pathology of attention: community attention to a ritual heats up the ritual with the community +/- convictions/sanctions, so any attack on the existence or even the form of the ritual is experienced as (1) an attack on the sense-making the community's done vis-a-vis the ritual and therefore (2) an attack on the community. This process is natural-human: the particulars, in any given case, we judge as healthy/sick. At the highest temperature of this heating up, charges of "heresy!" and "blasphemy!" resound: the community feels the attack on its sacred as an attack on the root of its sacred, viz., its Holy, *the Holy*. (Religious counseling centers in this psychospiritual fact. So does therapeutic ecumenical theology!)

4. **Antipedobaptism** is a protestant-puritan attack on pedobaptism on the ground that (1) it makes nonsense of the personal-confessional element, for which (2) it substitutes a metaphysical claim (3) that bastardizes sacrament into magic. Further, (4) it confuses the NT teaching on evangelism and mission(s) and, though having the virtue of family-emphasis, (5) dilutes with unbelievers the community and (5) pollutes with alien notions the community's mind and language. Eliminate baby-baptism and (1) the trumpet gives a clearer sound, with (2) improved communication: most of the new churches since WWII are antipedobaptist in this greatest numerical expansion in Christian history. But as a pastor I could not be dogmatic about this. I taught in three Baptist seminaries, then found that I had to refuse invitations to pastor Baptist churches; instead, I attached myself to a community church, which I led toward UCC (which it now is). And I baptized babies 3 of the 4 ways (dry, sprinkling, pouring, not dunking--so we practiced 7 of the 8 possible baptisms).

5. **Anabaptism**, however, is a whole nother kettle of fish. In the late Middle Ages,

thousands were slaughtered for their experience/support of re-("ana"-)-baptism, and only the physical ferocity of this attack has ceased: at a Boston meeting on baptism five years ago, Congregational scholar Robert Paul and I, in our speeches, mentioned our anabaptism (I by immersion at age 17, after age-12 confessional baptism by aspersion). The response was an almost solid wall of opposition. Why? The notion that baptism is unrepeatable roots in (1) the ancient Christian libelli controversy (the rigorists refusing readmission to Christians who'd knuckled under to persecution pressure and denied the Faith), which has some NT support (Heb.6.4-6, but this rigorism was relieved in the Apostolic Fathers); (2) the feeling that re-baptism casts aspersions (!) on infant baptism; (3) the catholic theology of baptism as conveying a metaphysical-change (*character indelibilis*) "grace"; and (4) the practical fact that anabaptism is disruptive of the unity of the Church, leading as it does to schism. In liberal churches, the problem is not insuperable: instance the current conversations toward merger of the pedobaptist UCC and the antipedobaptist Disciples of Christ. And in these 34 years (1950-84), this variety within the Morton Community Church (my parish) has been a force for, not against, unity....FOR anabaptism: (1) Psychology: folks converted after pedobaptism want to be "done again" (to use the least elegant words for it); (2) The community needs a ritual of re-entry for backsliders, for (a) the welcome-home of the prodigal and (b) the community's own reaffirmation of the baptismal vow; and (3) Rebaptism is, on top of all its other meanings, an act celebrating the Christian doctrine of forgiveness....While anabaptism is ANTIecumenical vis-a-vis traditional Catholic and most-Protestant theologies of baptism, within three generations (I believe) more than ½ of the world's practicing Christians will be anabaptist and antipedobaptist (so ecumenicals will open to include these two now-generally-rejected positions). (Qumranians self-baptized DAILY in anticipation of the soon entrance of God's Kingdom. See my #1231, which deals with factors within what I call "the haze" period of Christian baptism.) (A curiosum: Jesus baptized nobody, and Paul thanked God that he baptized almost nobody).

6. Culturally, primordial Christianity was a **reaction** (first to nascent Judaism, then to Hellenisticism) before it became a full-blown religion. The message and morals of Jesus modeled this reaction, which saw his death as confirmation of the reaction and his resurrection as commission to spread the reaction. So naturally, early Christian baptism (and, diachronically, baptismal development as ritual and the theology thereof) bears reaction-marks which, as Christianity became a religion, yielded to the "confirmation"-marks of a settled religion. Now, a settled religion is "natural": nature (in this instance, babies) and grace (in this instance, believers) are no longer separate (as they are at the reaction stage) but form a continuum. The prophetic conviction-over-against-community yields to community-as-conviction (in NT, the "Judaizing" tendency)....Settled religion rots, with two effects: (1) Corruption of vision and morals, and (2) Composting or yeasting of the tradition, with fresh life springing from the composting (e.g., "a root out of the stock of Jesse") and fresh bread from yeasting. Restorationism = the new life viewed as the renewal of the old life; instance, antipedobaptism, which thus reinvigorates the prophetic element--theoretically.

7. But catharism (the hope and teaching of a "pure" church) proves always a chimera. Existentially, pedo- and antipedo-baptist churches are equally pure/impure, blowing the "baptist" rationale. This **reality-factor** was major in my surrender of the baptist position which I adopted at age 17. See "the Halfway Covenant" in the history of my chosen denomination (Congregationalism) within my communion (UCC).

8. Early Christian initiation (one rite of baptism/confirmation/communion) fragmented, with "confirmation" partaking of both baptism and communion. In 1962, I convinced our UCC Committee on Baptism and Confirmation to promote **split-level confirmation** (but it got shot down "upstairs"): JUNIOR CONFIRMATION, celebrating the nature-cycle, a hormonal rite of passage (as Bar/Bat Mitzvah); SENIOR CONFIRMATION, celebrating considered Christian commitment and commissioning to serve the Lord in church and world. A few of our UCC churches have adopted this and written appropriate rituals.