

MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER WITH PEOPLE OF OTHER FAITHS THROUGH THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH

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Missionary methods and missionary praxis generally reflect the underlying theological principles of the sending church. For example, if a church were to abandon her actual outreach to people of other faiths, the reason for this could lie in her proclivity towards religious pluralism and its communication discipline called “dialogue.”¹ On the other hand, a strong active missionary presence will most likely reveal a church’s firm conviction in the classical idea of conversion brought about through the proclamation of the Gospel. The conservative mission movement wants missionary methods to be understood as the ways and means of bringing the Gospel to people of other faiths for their conversion and incorporation into a Christian community.

Churches whose tradition includes the sacraments would even go further and believe that this goal is not only achieved through the proclamation of the Gospel (*kerygma*) but also through the distribution of the sacraments; they are confessed as the means through which God imparts His gift of forgiveness and His grace. The Lutheran Church, which treasures the sacraments, would describe her mission as a “*kerygmatic-sacramental act*” in which administering baptism and holy communion hold pivotal roles in overcoming the missionary frontier of faith and unbelief.

Pre-Christian Conceptions of the Sacraments?

Usually a missionary will assume the sacraments will be the part of his missionary service that will present the greatest hindrance to being understood by the host culture. This may not necessarily be so. On the mission field where a missionary still encounters societies with traditional religions, analogies and corresponding concepts of the sacraments exist. In the animistic culture of Botswana, water is thought to have magical powers and therefore is often utilized for cleansing purposes, as can be seen in the washing of hands after funerals. For the “higher” religion, Hinduism, bathing in the water of the river Ganges epitomizes ritual cleansing.

From a phenomenological point of view, cultural anthropologists in the discipline “comparative studies of religions” are willing to classify the sacraments under general terms such as “rituals” or as “rites of initiation or passages”. Similar to rites in other religions, baptism would mark an individual’s passage, whether child or adult, from one stage in the spiritual life cycle to the next. This applies not only to baptism but also to holy communion, which would be classed as a rite of intensification to “bring the community together, increase group solidarity, and reinforce commitment to the beliefs

¹ Since the ambiguous statements of Vatican II on the relation of the church to other religions, scholars such as the Roman Catholic theologian Paul F. Knitter have actually rejected a missionary obligation of the church to other religions. See his book, *No Other name? A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985).

of the group.”² While such studies in comparative religions may often facilitate better understanding of the missionary’s host culture and even encourage one to seek points of contact, a distinct dichotomy exists between the sacraments of the Christian church and the pre-Christian initiation rites, as will be shown below.

Baptism is Salvation

According to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, the mission of the church seeks to make disciples from peoples of other faiths. Such discipleship is inextricably linked with baptism. For in baptism, discipleship as a coming to faith is fully realized. The missionary outreach to people of other faiths is thus connected with a sacrament, namely, baptism.

Baptism is, seen from a missionary perspective, multifaceted. But its primary divine purpose is to enact a new being and incorporation into the body of Christ. Through baptism the individual does not merely undergo a reorientation of mind and outlook on life but moreover is led to a total new existence in Jesus Christ and a victory over death and the devil. One often speaks in this context of a “*Herrschaftswechsel*” (change of lordship), a technical term used to describe the switch of dominion or ownership over the individual occurring at baptism. Luther expresses this thought beautifully in his Large Catechism, in accordance with Romans 6:1-11: that the act of being dipped in water and emerging from it “indicate the power and effect of Baptism, which is simply the slaying of the old Adam and the resurrection of the new man...Now...we enter Christ’s kingdom”.³ Here the shortcomings of the phenomenological studies of cultural anthropologists are most apparent. Baptism as “the sacrament of mission” stands in tension with the traditional initiation rites of other cultures. It is not just a mere transition of one stage in earthly life to the next. Rather, it is a total spiritual rebirth of the old man whereby salvation is attained.

Baptism, an Interpretative Force

Baptism has further major impacts upon the individual’s life beyond the above-mentioned spiritual benefits. The “*Herrschaftswechsel*” inaugurated through baptism ushers in a significant period in the individual’s life. If baptism is correctly understood as an act of renunciation of traditional worship of the deity and the ancestors (often audible through the renunciation formula, if still used), then the individual’s personal and immediate communal and cultural life will have to be reinterpreted. This begins very often by way of exchanging the old name with a new name. In doing so, the individual publicly renounces the past and indicates to the surrounding world that a new life in Jesus Christ has now begun. It would be false to perceive such a confessional act as a complete

² Stephen A. Grunlan and Marvin K. Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology. A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), 235f. See also Paul Hiebert, *Cultural Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1995), 160-175.

³ *The Book of Concord. The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Translated and edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959). Quoted as Tappert 445, 64-67.

denial of the indigenous culture or a betrayal of one's own background. It is rather a theological and spiritual reinterpretation of one's own existence.⁴

Beyond the fact that baptism serves as the divine instrument of bestowing salvation, it also signifies integration not only into a spiritual body but also into a new visible worshipping community. Once more, associations and similarities between the sacrament and common tribal rites of initiation may surface here. However, any ties or resemblance to the former old practices are totally destroyed by the sacrament of baptism through the "newness" of its character. Prevalent social structures such as tribe, clan, caste and traditional gear such as talisman may be demythologized and stripped of their religious validation because of this deeper and richer felt fellowship with believers in the body of Christ. Sadly though, incomplete reinterpretation processes have often resulted in the creation of "independent churches," as history shows. These churches present a unique mingling of traditional beliefs and rites with Christian principles and practices.⁵

Baptism is not Coercion

The history of missions often reveals unfortunate incidences of enforced baptisms. Charlemagne's slaughter of 4500 Saxons during the Saxon wars (772-804) to break the tribe's refusal to be baptized serves as a horrid example. The Ethiopian's desire, "Look, there is water; what prevents me from being baptized" (Acts 8:36), however, shows that baptism should be administered without solicitation and it should be based on a voluntary desire of the candidate. Baptism in this regard should be viewed upon as a divine invitation freely extended by God.

A common issue of debate is extractionism, in other words, the practice of baptizing individuals who have been singled out from their community. This may have social ramifications which frequently result in the individual's total estrangement and isolation from the society. Missionaries such as Bruno Gutman in East Africa and Christian Kaiser in Papua New Guinea addressed such social concerns with group baptisms. But that practice is equally problematic. The bottom line of this issue remains relevant, nonetheless. Baptism never occurs in isolation but always wishes to incorporate an individual into a given communion of believers. In view of religions such Hinduism and Buddhism where spirituality remains internalized to personal experience, the sacrament of baptism must be emphasized as the objective means through which God constitutes a fellowship of believers, a congregation and church. In this sense baptism and the church form inextricably-linked entities where one leads to the other.

Infant Baptism

Missiological discussions often revolve around infant baptism. This will be the case especially among the second generation of Christians where the first missionary

⁴ This is different from the 19th-century mission practice when missionaries have foisted their own mother culture on to baptism candidates in having them adopt common German or English Christian names.

⁵ Andreas Grünschloß, "Initiation in Diverse Contexts," Dictionary of Mission, Theology, History, Perspectives, edited by Karl Müller, et al. (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 212-219.

encounter -- such as the “parents” had as adults -- no longer occurs. Although questioned by churches of the Radical Reformation (Mennonites, Amish, Baptists), because of the impossibility of the infant’s making a confession of faith, infant baptism has remained the standard practice in Lutheran mission. Thereby Lutheran mission has remained faithful to biblical evidence (Acts 2:38. 39; 10:48; 16:15) and to the theological tradition. The directions for continuation of infant baptism are thus clear. A missionary baptizes “solely on the command of God”.⁶

One should also add, that due to the immanent danger of an individual lapsing back to the traditional faith, often expedited by an unchristian environment, missionaries continue to appreciate the guiding advice and support of sponsors and godparents.

Baptism and Catechetical Instruction

The missionary praxis of catechizing catechumens plays an important and major role in making disciples. However, no single practice has emerged here. Whereas some missionaries regard pre-baptismal catechesis as a minimalist instruction into the basic Christian doctrines relating to baptism, others consider such pre-baptism instruction not only as preparation for baptism but already also for confirmation. One should keep in mind, though, that becoming a disciple is a continuous event in a Christian’s life. A deepening and continuous instruction into the Christian faith therefore remains a never-ending task on the part of the missionary and disciple.

The Interchurch Recognition of Baptism

In general, baptism is not monopolized by any church denomination. The validity of baptism if celebrated in a “great” or mainline church is generally accepted. A disturbing concern remains the question how the baptism should be evaluated which have been administered in “non-mainline” churches, such as in the innumerable syncretistic churches. Standard criteria of evaluation have not been adopted here. In general, rebaptism has not been performed if former host church confesses the Triune God and the three ecumenical Creeds.

The Sacrament of the Altar

In outreach to people of other faiths, the sacrament of the altar functions only indirectly as a missionary sacrament. Its value lies in the bestowal of the gift of forgiveness to an already-existing baptized community of believers and of strengthening the fellowship. Mission experience in Botswana on the part of this author has confirmed a common missiological insight that the exclusive and closed character of the sacrament of the altar is readily accepted. This may to some degree be attributed to the knowledge of rites that people practiced before their conversion to Christianity. Such knowledge is then transferred to the Christian understanding of holy communion.

⁶ LC IV, 57 (Tappert, 444).

A common phenomenon among “young” Christians on the mission field is their inclination towards a magical conception of the sacraments. Just as the early church combated a magical interpretation of the sacrament as “*pharmakos athanasia*” (medicine of immortality) or the Reformation the “*ex opere operato*” (by the outward act) of the Roman Catholic Church, so too missionaries often struggle to prevent “young” Christians from imposing on the sacrament magical qualities. Proper instruction is imperative here with frequent insistence on the beneficial reception of the sacraments through *faith*.⁷

Summary

Missionary encounter with people of other faiths cannot bypass the sacrament of baptism and, in terms of offering sustenance, also the Sacrament of the Altar. A correct understanding of the sacraments cannot be derived from pre-Christian rites. Instead, their true interpretation rests in Scripture which includes the understanding that the Lord of salvation is truly present and received. Sacraments play an important role in the formation of the spiritual-physical character of the believing community. It is mainly because of them that the Christians church is set apart and kept distinct from any other meeting and gathering in society. Particularly in the context of a dominant heathen culture, the sacraments ultimately serve as a barricade against the perpetual onslaught of non-Christian elements on the believers. In such situations they truly serve their purpose of being signs and testimonies of God’s salvific will to strengthen and awaken faith.⁸ In a hostile environment they impart gifts of forgiveness and grace nowhere else to be found. A church of Christ thus lives in and from the sacraments. The missiologist Walter Freytag observes correctly: “A church without sacraments will die.”⁹

⁷ Large Catechism IV, 53 (Tappert, 443).

⁸ Augsburg Confession XIII, 1 (Tappert, 35).

⁹ Walter Freytag, “*Die Sakramente auf dem Missionsfeld*,” *Reden und Aufsätze I*, Edited by Jan Hermelink and Hans Jochen Margull (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1961), 219-228, therein page 228.