

FULL SALVATION AND THE LITURGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

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By now, thanks to the research work of R. Newton Flew and various attempts either to extend or (in vain) to rebutt his position, it is a point needing no further demonstration: the idea of Christian perfection, variously defined, has been a theological constant in the history of the faith. Seldom, if ever, has the Church been without exhortation to, expectation of, and professed arrival at perfection of some sort, in this life.

So, in what way or ways is the holiness movement different, or at least distinctive? Surely not in its definition of Christian perfection. Not every branch within the Body nourishes itself on the same definition, but the holiness movement is certainly not alone in defining Christian perfection as unconditional devotion to God or as perfect love to God and neighbor. It is only a little less typical in speaking of it as freedom from original sin or depravity. What really distinguishes the holiness movement is its understanding of entry into the experience of Christian perfection and its way of relating the doctrine of perfection to the rest of Christian theology. The movement insists that Christian perfection is begun in the experience of entire sanctification, which is a distinct and "second" work of grace, "an act of God subsequent to regeneration." This sanctification is said to be "wrought instantaneously."

Holiness scholars believe that these two notes, distinct secondness and instantaneity, are part of the doctrinal legacy of John Wesley, and there seems to be little room for doubting their findings on these points. But where did Wesley get his views? Certainly from Scripture, reason, and experience; but why should he develop what appears to be a novel view from passages of Scripture, with logical processes and by means of experiences that others had examined—with quite different doctrinal results? And, to what degree is a novel view to be taken as normative?

Here enters an aspect of Christian life to which Wesley gave close, lifelong attention, though he says proportionately little about it. One writes here of the liturgies of the Church of England. Wesley occasionally criticized, and criticized sharply, the church in whose rituals he lived and died. He knew the dangers of what we would call "formalism," but his antidote was not to ignore formality. He insisted that the Methodist societies should meet at times that would not interfere with "attendance upon the means of grace," i.e., the services of the Anglican parish church. Methodists were to be the truest of Anglicans. And when it became obvious that American Methodism was developing an identity separate from its Anglican mother, Wesley sent it not a list of doctrines but a liturgy. He risked bitter

criticism in ordaining ministers, but these were to serve in America and he felt it necessary to ordain them so that the American Methodists would not be without properly celebrated sacraments and a properly ordained continuing ministry, the apostolic succession.

None of this denied the importance of right doctrine, but it all forms a context for doctrine which must not be forgotten, as it so readily has been. For Wesley, the constitution of the church is not her articles of faith. Rather it is the way in which she worships. The articles of faith are essentially an intellectual articulation of what the church expresses in the affective richness of her worship. Her worship, in turn, is an attempt to symbolize and propagate the Christianizing of all of life at both the personal and the societal levels. This is how an Anglican would think of worship and doctrine and spiritual life; especially a rather "high-church" Anglican, such as Wesley certainly was (though the term *high-church* is of latter use).

We may take it as axiomatic, then, that Wesley's understanding of Christian perfection had at least some relationship to the liturgy which otherwise shaped and guided his spiritual life. But what of the distinctive notes of "secondness" and "instantaneity"?

Obviously, these are notes having to do with Christian *experience*, as distinguished from strictly or fundamentally intellectual or revelational concerns. For Wesley, this would put them in the realm of liturgy. But here, except for a few scant clues, the researcher works inferentially.

On the other hand, the early liturgies of the Church do seem to reflect these notes of "secondness" and "instantaneity," and with these liturgies we know Wesley was familiar. The Anglican liturgy itself reflected them to some degree, and Wesley himself, conscious of this fact, took interest in the worship of the premedieval Church. So, we can venture at least a tentative hypothesis that Wesley took some cues for his doctrine from the liturgical heritage of Christianity.

Let us take a look at the early liturgies, then, to see what may have been there in the way of materials for Wesley's doctrinal construction a millennium or more later. In this essay, we shall confine ourselves to the sacrament of baptism after a few brief remarks on the meaning of the sacraments in general.

I. Sacrament in the Early Church

The Early Church was born at worship and sought to sustain its life by worship. To be sure, it had the Old Testament and the teachings and biography of Jesus from the beginning, and ere long it had what we now call the New Testament. But these writings were read and reflected upon in a context of worship. Even the theologians, a breed that came along in the second and third generations of the life of the Church, were worshippers. Not all worshippers were theologians, but all theologians were worshippers. And the Church built (or remodeled) for wor-

ship. Sanctuaries, not writing rooms nor debating halls, were constructed for the faithful. So, at the center of being Christian was worship, not scientific or intellectual articulation; corporate celebration, not debate. Liturgy was part of the very path to salvation. Theology was a sort of tourist guide or topographical map. It was to explicate the path. But the path included liturgy. No one doubted the need for worship, but not a few doubted the need for theology.

Within worship, no activities meant more than the rituals denoting entrance into the faith and the offer of grace to continue in the Way. Entrance or initiation was made in baptism. Grace for continuance was offered in the Lord's Supper.

These rituals were called "mysteries" and "symbols." They were not called "mysteries" because they hid anything or were obscure in meaning but because in them, the common, such as bread and wine and river water, carried profoundly uncommon meaning. Bread carried the meaning of Christ's broken body, wine the meaning of His shed blood, and water the meaning of cleansing from sin. "Symbols" they were because they took the believer right to the heart of what it meant to be a believer. For us, a symbol is an abstraction, meaningless until we assign it meaning, like the gold watch given a retiree as "a symbol of appreciation." For the Early Church a symbol was a way into the essence of the thing symbolized. The gold watch, in this case, is a fitting symbol as it somehow expresses in itself, apart from our opinions of it, appreciation—it says "appreciation," it *is* appreciation.

II. The Meaning of Baptism in the Early Church

For the Early Church, baptism was the symbol of the washing away of sin and of "repentance unto life." It took the latter meaning from its symbolizing of the burial and resurrection of Christ. As symbol, at several levels, the rite itself was understood to participate in the very reality of cleansing and repentance, burial and resurrection. It was in no way an abstraction, a mere "outward sign" or a simple "testimony." Baptism was a way into the very essence of salvation and a part of that essence. Baptism was a soteriological moment.

We will let Clement of Alexandria, a teacher who died about A.D. 200, say it for a host of early Christian writers:

Is Christ perfected by the washing and is he sanctified by the descent of the Spirit? Indeed so. And the same thing also takes place in our case, for whom the Lord became the pattern. Being baptized, we are illuminated; illuminated, we are made sons; being made sons, we are perfected; perfected, we are made immortal. . . . This work is variously called: "a gift of grace," "illumination," "perfection," "washing." It is the washing through which we are cleansed of our sins, the grace-gift by which the penalties for our sins are removed, the illumination through which the holy light of salvation is beheld, that is, through which the divine is clearly seen. . . . Instruction leads to

faith, and faith together with baptism is trained by the Holy Spirit. . . . We who have repented of our sins, renounced our faults, and are purified by baptism run back to the eternal light, children to their father (*Instructor* 1.6, 25.3-26.2; 30.2; 32.1).

So the Early Church would totally agree with us when we say that baptism is a symbol of having received salvation in Christ Jesus; when we say that baptism is "an outward sign of an inward work of grace." But they would attach an entirely different meaning to the words. Citing such passages as John 3:5; Eph. 5:25-26; and Heb. 10:22; they would say that the very act of baptism is itself part of the total act of salvation.

III. Baptism and the Spirit's Work

It may be that early on, some were baptized in Jesus' name alone (Acts 8:16; 19:15; Rom. 6:3), but trinitarian baptism seems to have become the standard form very quickly. And this form was understood to have been commanded by the Lord (Matt. 28:19). The New Testament is not clear as to whether Christian baptism is different from "John's baptism" or the "baptism of repentance." But it is clearly a requisite to Christianity, for there are 12 specific instances of Christian baptism on or after Pentecost recorded in Acts and 1 Corinthians.

Baptism symbolized the work of the Spirit and it was the Spirit who made baptism effective. Tertullian (c. 160—c. 230), a native of Carthage, North Africa (near present-day Tunis, Tunisia), and the first of the great Latin-writing Christian scholars, set down the Early Church's understanding of the relationship between the Holy Spirit and baptism. Responding to some critics who were saying that baptism availed little, if anything, Tertullian says that just as the Spirit of God "moved over the waters" in the first creation, making them fit for God's own purposes, so Christians invoke the Spirit's presence upon the waters of baptism to sanctify them to the Father's purposes again. And as the waters are sanctified, so they are used to sanctify. Yet baptism proper, says Tertullian, does not give the gift of the presence of the Spirit in fullness. That gift must come at another moment. However, baptism proper does make one ready to receive that presence. And so it is that immediately following baptism itself, as a part of the total ritual, "We are anointed all over with consecrated oil . . . then the hand (of the minister) is laid on us, while the Holy Spirit is invoked and invited through a benediction. . . . Then, down over the body thus cleansed and consecrated comes the Holy Spirit from the Father" (*On Baptism*, 4-8).

Tertullian's treatise was for centuries the standard doctrinal statement on baptism, and remains so among both Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and the Orthodox, though Tertullian himself finally became a schismatic. What is clear here, and important to the development of the doctrine of entire sanctification as Wesley came to express it, is the clear distinction between the act of baptizing (initiation) and the act of receiving the Holy Spirit in fullness (sanctification), though both are included in the one rite

called baptism. In fact, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage a generation after Tertullian's death, made the distinction in meaning even sharper (*Letters* 63:8; 70:2; 73:9). On the other hand, the distinction should not be allowed to mask the unity of the ritual as a whole. The early Christian could not think of baptism without thinking of the gift of the fullness of the Spirit as well. The baptismal act itself was most especially related to remission of sin. But from the very beginning our Lord had connected remission of sin with the gift of the Holy Spirit (John 20:21-23), so the baptismal liturgy as a whole includes first the symbol of remission (baptism proper) and then the symbol of the gift of the Spirit (anointing and laying on of hands)—two qualitatively distinct workings of grace in one rite.

Space prevents review of it here, but the reader should take a look at Hippolytus's description of the baptismal liturgy in his *Apostolic Tradition*, a work of the early third century with much more ancient roots. It became the standard for the Church in Western Europe.

Hippolytus presents baptism as a tripartite symbol with (1) a prebaptismal liturgy that includes an invocation of the sanctifying Spirit, a ritual for disrobing, renunciation of Satan, and exorcism by anointing; (2) baptism proper, with confession of faith, sometimes a brief dialogue, triple immersion and anointing in thanksgiving; (3) a post-baptismal liturgy which included the laying on of hands and an anointing symbolizing the coming of the Spirit in fullness.

The three acts of this drama are integral one to another, but each clearly symbolized a qualitatively distinctive act of God in His relationship to the believer. This is clear in all of the Early Fathers who treat baptism to any extent: Tertullian, Hippolytus, Cyprian, and Pope Leo I, especially.

How and when and why the Church lost its early understanding of its own baptismal liturgy is a sad and complex story. Suffice it to say that it lost its ability to interpret its own symbols, and in time came to confound and to confuse them—not suddenly, but over centuries.

And yet, it never lost a keen, if unarticulated, awareness that beyond initiation into the faith there lies a qualitatively distinct "second" stage or state contingent upon one's first having been regenerated. It was clearly understood that this stage is characterized by a special visitation of the Holy Spirit, both as a continuing purifier and as the empowerer who gives gifts of grace for the leading of a holy life. The language and symbolism are those of "secondness" and "instantaneity." To this continuing awareness, the later sacrament of confirmation gives clearest witness, but not the sole witness.

It is in the context of these liturgical cues that Wesley comes to spiritual maturity. Lacking more direct evidence than we have, it is inappropriate to make categorical statements about either the doctrine of sanctification in the Early Church or its impingement upon Wesley. But there is certainly sufficient evidence to venture an informed opinion on both counts.