

Christian Initiation Presented in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Gospel of John

Underson Musina O.Carm

Introduction

Christian initiation is defined by Marsh as a process whereby new believers enter and become full members of the community (63). This article seeks to compare and contrast Christian initiation as presented in the Gospel of John and Acts of the Apostles. Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus and passages of Acts which record initiation are going to be used. Apart from the catechesis, initiation comprises the sacraments of baptism, confirmation and the Eucharist. These three are required for a full Christian initiation.

Similarities of Christian Initiation as Presented in Acts and Gospel of John

For one to be baptised the Good News of Christ had to be shared. There was some catechesis before the initiation. It was after hearing the word that people would ask the apostles; 'what should we do now?' (Acts 1:38). The answer was baptism. In the gospel of John, Nicodemus interaction with Jesus led him to conversion. The coming of Nicodemus to Jesus explains Christian initiation in the sense that for one to be baptised, the person is not forced but should willingly do so. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. Notably, the night is associated with darkness, and in this respect, Nicodemus through listening to Christ was gradually coming out of darkness into the light of the Christ (Fuller 1044).

In addition, baptism comes as a response to the act believing. Before a person is baptised conversion was expected. Paul preached to the jailer and exhorted him to believe in Jesus the Lord. The jailer believed and his entire household was baptised (Acts 16: 31-33). In the story of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 26-40), the pattern which is followed

is clearly shown: the good news of Christ was preached to him, the eunuch professed and believed the word, and then he was baptised. Those who believed, the whole household was baptised (Acts 16:32). This can also point that there was infant baptism since the apostolic age. In the Gospel of John, what is preached should make one believe that Jesus is the Messiah and through this belief they may gain life (John 20:31). The interaction of Jesus and Nicodemus clearly shows that, everyone who believes in Jesus has eternal life (3:14). Therefore, baptism was always viewed as connected with faith and it is a gift of God who wishes all to be saved by it (Walsh 87).

More so, the prerequisite of Christian initiation is faith in Jesus. The one who is going to receive life to the fullest is the one who believes (John 3:15). In Acts, baptism was extended to all people who showed a sign of repentance including non-Jews like Ethiopian eunuch and Simon the Samaritan (Acts 2:41, 8:12). Peter said God promised forgiveness and Holy Spirit to Jews and all those far off, whomever the Lord will choose (2:40). In the Gospel of John, 'The wind blows where it wills, and from or where it goes; so, it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit' (3:8). The Greek word for wind is *pneuma* which is same as the word for 'spirit.' Thus, this verse entails that, as wind blows where ever it wants to, so the spirit has freedom in selecting whom it drives to be a believer (Fuller 1042).

Another similarity is that, in both Acts of the Apostles and in the Gospel of John, baptism was to be conducted through the use of water. John the Baptist as recorded in the Gospel of John baptised with water (1:25). Jesus said to Nicodemus that one was incapable of entering the Kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit (John 3:5). Jesus here did not use the term 'water' in a metaphorical way but he meant that, 'true and natural water is necessary for baptism' (ND 1421). In the Acts of the Apostles, Christian initiation was done with water. When Philip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch, they reached where there was water and the eunuch requested to be baptised (Acts 8: 36-37). Another notable example is that incident when Peter

preached to the Gentiles and they believed. Peter asked if anyone could withhold water of baptism for these people who have believed (Acts 10: 44-49). This clearly shows that, in both Acts and John baptism with water was a pivotal for being admitted into the Christian community (Ronzani 38).

Furthermore, Christian initiation as presented in the Acts and the Gospel of John shows that it comprises the water and spirit. John the Baptist clearly indicated in his ministry that Jesus was coming to baptise with the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:8). This shows that, the Church has two distinct sacraments; baptism and confirmation. Jesus before ascension promised that his apostles will baptise in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5). Similarly, in the Acts of the Apostles after baptism with water, the believers received Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands. Receiving the Holy Spirit is clearly shown that it is not a necessary effect of water baptism. Acts 8:16-17, demonstrates that one can be baptised yet without receiving the Holy Spirit. At Ephesus, the believers received the Holy Spirit not when they were baptised but later when Apostle Paul laid his hands on them. Thus, there is a distinction between baptism and receiving of the Holy Spirit.

To add, in John 3:3 uses the word *anōthen* which has double meaning: 'born from above' and 'again.' These words make it clear that to be born *anōthen* there is need of water and spirit. The human being is a composite of body and soul; it will also take both water and spirit to create him anew; thereby initiating him into the Christian community. Christian baptism is followed by laying on of hands which seals and completes the union between the Church and Christ. One is confirmed so as to proclaim the word of God without fear and thus the fruits and virtues of the Spirit are actualised in this sacrament therefore baptism by water and Spirit gives an indelible mark that no sin can erase it (CCC 1242). As such, it is evident that water-bath and the gift of the Spirit are in some way distinguishable but they can never be totally separated (Austin 7).

The Christian initiation comprised repentance and forgiveness. The baptism in the Gospel of John was baptism of repentance (3:15). Believing in the good news eventually leads to repentance and the forgiveness of sins. There is a close relationship among repentance, baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. The salvation given by baptism is described in the Acts simply as the forgiveness of sin (Acts 2:38/Walsh 87). This continues to demonstrate connection between sacraments of baptism and confirmation. Mark 2: 15-16 mentions that two things are required for one to be saved: believing and being baptised. The person who fails to believe will be condemned. For instance, Ananias and Sapphira who had converted to Christianity baptised and became members of the Christian community but they failed to adhere to the apostles' teaching. They sinned against the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:1-11). Even if one is baptised one cannot receive salvation unless he believes.

Differences in Christian Initiation as Presented in Acts and Gospel of John

Baptism in the Acts is conducted 'in the name of Jesus' (2:37-41). Baptism was supposed to be done in his name because the one believes in Jesus consequently belongs to him. For Marsh, being initiated in the name of Jesus meant entering into service of Christ, assuming and bearing the name of Christ, being called a Christian (50). Being initiated 'in the name of Jesus' entailed the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). The forgiveness of sins could mean the removal of the obstacles which separate human beings from their creator (Marsh 50). Baptism 'in the name of Jesus' is not mentioned in the Gospel of John because this was a post resurrection event, a direct result of the exaltation and glorification of Jesus (Marsh 44).

Another difference in the type of Christian initiation in the book of Acts and Gospel of John is that, in Acts, baptism is seen as human sharing in the Paschal Mystery of Jesus that is, sharing in his passion, death and resurrection. Through the Christian initiation as recorded in the Acts believers are immersed into Christ's death and rise with him

by the power of his resurrection (Chrichton 34). It is through baptism that believers pass from death to life and are ‘engrafted into his death and rise with him by the power of his resurrection’ (34). The aspect of baptism being a sharing in the Paschal Mystery was not mentioned in the Gospel of John, probably because it was not yet appropriate as it was before Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Ultimately, in Acts of the Apostles, baptism brings new believers to the Christian community (2:41). The Christians were devoted to the teaching of the apostles and to communal life. This shows that, the preaching of the apostles was followed by continual teaching which would assist believers to build and maintain the faith they had received and expressed. Baptism and laying on of hands finally lead to the celebration of the Eucharist which is the last part of the Christian initiation. There is evidence to show that Christians gather on the first day of the week to celebrate the Eucharist (20:7). The celebration of the Eucharist as a community is evidently a sign of full membership in the community of believers and fully participates in its life (Marsh 56). Baptism did not only unite believers to Christ but also to one another. The celebration of the Eucharist and believing in Christ united Christians, heart and soul, sharing all their possessions (4:32). Consequently, the celebration of the Eucharist is the climax of the Christian initiation. The word is preached; people believed and baptised then received the Holy Spirit and finally participate in the breaking of bread.

Conclusion

The book of the Acts of the Apostles and the Gospel of John clearly outline the Christian practice and understanding of Christian initiation. The initiation comprised of baptism, laying on of hands and completed with participation at the Eucharist. Jesus’ life, ministry, passion, death and resurrection give a special meaning and significance to the initiation rites of Christians. There are, in the Gospel of John and Acts of the Apostles, similarities regarding the

way Christian initiation is explained and expressed. There is preparation before baptism which includes the teaching of the mystery of Christ. The candidates for baptism should show conversion and repentance. Baptism was conducted using water and the baptised received Holy Spirit. There are also some notable differences which are found regarding Christian initiation in these books. In Acts baptism is presented as sharing in the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. Sharing the Eucharist culminates the initiation in Acts. Whereas in John there is no mention of these aspects undoubtedly because Jesus had not yet died and resurrected.

List of Sources

Austin, Gerard. *The Rite of Confirmation. Anointing with the Spirit*. New York: Pueblo, 1985.

Catechism of the Catholic Church. Ireland: Veritas, 1994.

Chrichton, J D. *Christian Celebration: The Sacraments*. Britain: Fletcher and Son Ltd, 1977.

Fuller, Reginald, *et al.* *A New Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1969.

Harrington, Daniel J. *The Acts of the Apostles*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992.

Marsh, Thomas. *Gift of Community: Baptism and Confirmation*. Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984.

Molonoey, Francis. *The Gospel of John*. Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1998.

Ronzani, Rinaldo. *Christian Initiation: Baptism and Confirmation*. Kenya: Pauline Publications, 2007.

The African Bible. Kenya: Pauline Publications, 2011.

Walsh, Liam. *The Sacraments of Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist*. London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1992.

