



Getting the Wean Done

George J. Whyte

The baptising of infant children has long been part of the Church of Scotland's 'core business'. Even in these secular times, there is still a steady stream of churched and unchurched people who request baptism for the recently arrived. It seems that for many, the birth of a child continues to be a time when they should turn to the church for this time-honoured 'rite of passage'. Even if the new parents themselves do not feel it is a priority there is often a grandmother pushing them to make the call to the manse. Accordingly, however much ministers and elders might like to talk doctrine and theology at such moments, the baptismal act is overlaid with a cultural coverlet, and it has a provenance which is as much ecclesiastical as it is theological, and as traditional as it is doctrinal. As many parish ministers have discovered, to refuse the gift of this venerable icon to a baby can result in an unholy row.

From at least 1712 until 1963 the legislation of the Church of Scotland said that every child in the parish had a right to baptism. However, in that year the law was changed and the right was replaced by an eligibility test based on the parents' church allegiance. Such changes to our rule book are enacted swiftly at a General Assembly or two but they can take a long time to permeate the world outside.

As part of work for a degree course at Princeton Theological Seminary I decided to revisit the subject of infant baptism. I know it well from the standpoint of an experienced minister but I wanted to understand how it looked from the parents' point of view. So I interviewed some parents who had their children baptized, and asked them about their motivations, concerns and understandings. (There is only space in this article to deal with one line of my inquiry – "Why did you want your child to be baptised?") I then compared their response to what the Church believes such parents are asking for and receiving when they bring their child to the font.



What the Parents Said

I asked these non-church people why they had asked the local minister to baptise their son or daughter. I drew out these strands from their answers: -

Tradition

Several parents began by saying, “I was baptised”. These young parents, often far from their place of birth and involved in a different society from the one into which they were born, were wanting to do for their children that which had been done for them. Many argue today that our contemporary culture is markedly different from the society which formed the Church of Scotland’s practice and institutional ethos. Yet here is a ‘custom’ surviving in this changed landscape. Some then went on to say that they felt it was “the right thing to do”. (I suspect the rightness of the action in some cases had been underlined quite heavily by the baby’s grandparents, but that lay beyond the scope of my research.) One parent said that if they had their child baptised then, “we had done everything right for her”. One might hear in this comment an echo of Oscar Wilde’s Lady Bracknell when she says to her nephew, who has inquired about his identity, “Every luxury that money could buy, including christening, had been lavished upon you by your fond and doting parents.”

Opportunity

I minister in a middle class, professional area and in such places there is a great emphasis laid by parents on giving children ‘opportunities’ – sometimes ones that they had not been given, but very often chances and experiences which they enjoyed and which they feel benefited them and equipped them for a successful life. So for local children there is a seemingly endless round of sports programmes, music lessons, and extra tuition. To this list of ‘opportunities’ some of the parents whom I interviewed had added baptism. So they told me that their child would have “the opportunity to experience church” or they would have “the chance to make up their own minds one day”. Quite

why they want the child to make up its own mind when they have decided that the Christian way was right is a matter for another study.

Community

The word ‘community’ was mentioned often by parents although not always with the same meaning. They listed as part of their motivation for seeking baptism things like:

- “so that he can experience community”
- “be known with her local community”
- “social side – brings families together”.

These are the notions of community which are based on place and blood. Most of the people I deal with in baptismal ministry have their roots in places other than Colinton. This in turn means that they are often far removed from relatives. It is perfectly understandable that people in such a location would seek to ensure that their child formed local relationships – the absence of which must be very clear to young parents struggling often with the tensions between the upbringing of children and the need or desire to continue with their professional life.

However, it seems that in the parents’ minds there is a connection between family, place and church. This raises interesting issues for a church that places emphasis on parish and which sets as a priority both community creation and family ministry. So one parent can say they have sensed “a lovely sense of community in Colinton Church”, and another one can go a step further and see that the baptism of their daughter is an expression of “wanting her to be recognised within the Christian Church”.

This is a multi-layered meaning of community – place, community of other children and beyond the family, the community of the Church both local and universal.



Denominational Silence

It is also perhaps worth pointing out what was not said in the interviews. There was, for example, no mention of community as denomination. None of the parents used the word “protestant” or “catholic”, and only one came near by saying “it was my first contact with the Church of Scotland”. In a country once bedevilled by sectarianism this is an interesting insight into how we have changed. There seems to be no, or very little, denominational loyalty. The parents interviewed for this study (and indeed the many others that I deal with week by week) are from widely varied backgrounds, but in choosing where to have their child baptised the subject of the local congregation’s denominational setting does not seem to be very important.

It is also worth commenting on how little link there is evident between ethnicity and community identity. The interviewed parents even in this small sample had different nationalities (both U.K. and wider European), but they did not present themselves as baptismal parents in terms of the country of their birth. For a denomination which proudly styles itself “The Church of Scotland” this raises an issue which has only just crept onto its radar screen.

It seems that for parents asking for baptism it is very much the local church that matters. They come to it because it is of the place and it is used by their neighbours. They examine what it might offer to them and their family. They do not seem to inquire how it is governed.



Disconnection between Church and Baptism

Many parents who ask for baptism have not been and do not plan to start attending the local church (or indeed any other church) on a very regular basis. Some expressed pleasure that, at my initial visit, I did not appear to insist on such attendance – despite the fact that I always tell parents that bringing their child up as a Christian means bringing them to church on a Sunday.



How can it be that an action which aims to welcome the child into the church does not seem connected in the parents' brains with the worship life of that church? Is there something of the wider changes in society evidenced here? And what does it say about the worship of the local congregation that people who are favourably disposed towards the Christian faith do not wish to be in the pews on a Sunday?

If there is such an immediate disconnection between the young family and the local church what chance is there that the baptised infant will grow up knowing anything about what the church teaches and what it feels like from the inside?



The Christian Faith of the Parents

The most striking absence in the verbatim record is this: none of the parents interviewed raised issues of faith in direct terms. No-one spontaneously mentioned among their motivations the kind of subjects and phraseology beloved of service books. No parent said that they were following the command of the risen Christ in Matthew 28 – “Go, therefore, to all nations and make them my disciples; baptise them ...”.¹ No parent mentioned their acceptance of the promise expressed by St Peter, “This promise is to you and your children and to all who are far away ...”.² as the spur to phoning the minister. The Church of Scotland’s *Common Order* ends its selection of scripture sentences for the Baptismal Service with the ringing testimony of Peter, “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a dedicated nation, a people claimed by God for his own, to proclaim the glorious deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.”³ – yet no parent said that they were claiming this wonderful inheritance for their child. *Common Order* also suggests that the minister should, in the early part of the baptismal liturgy, ask parents, “In presenting your child for baptism, desiring that she may be grafted into Christ as a member of his body the Church, do you receive the teaching of the Christian faith which we confess in the Apostles’ Creed?” No mother or father has ever used such words to me and very, very few have ever touched on such a motivation in planning the big day.

The responses of parents as they talked about baptism raised many questions for me: -

- Are they at the place where the Church of Scotland presumes them to be, as set out in legislation and liturgy?
- If they are not exactly where the Church might want them to be when their child is baptized, how might the local church join them at that place so that baptism may still be the starting point for the Christian upbringing of their children?
- Can I, and my congregation, having heard the parents speak, do more to ensure that the font marks the beginning of the path of discipleship?



Tradition as Motivation

The Church of Scotland works to a model of baptism where the baptising of infants is the norm. It cites scripture in favour of this practice. So the Baptismal Service in *Common Order* offers the scriptural strands mentioned above along with the much carved “Suffer little children to come unto me”⁷⁴ to tie what we do today back to the historic practice of the Church and to words attributed to Christ himself.

However, the tradition which parents mentioned first in the interviews was the continuity between their baptism as children and what they now wanted to do for their own offspring.

The Church of Scotland asks parents to publicly affirm that their motivation for bringing their child to the font is that they may be “grafted into Christ as members of his body the Church”. But the motivation that parents raised was to repeat that which had been done for them by the previous generation, specifically was “doing the right thing for them”. It may be that they felt no need to state the obvious – but I am not so sure.

The topmost layer of their thoughts seem to relate to fairly ill-defined – if deeply sincere – feelings rather than doctrinal certainties. Their inclination towards having their child baptised seems to draw firstly

on family rather than church tradition. It would be insulting to these parents to presume that all they are seeing in baptism is a rite of passage and an excuse to celebrate the birth of a child. They would be horrified if I were to suggest that their wish to have the child baptised is not firmly rooted in the Christian tradition. What is helpful for the minister whom they approach is the knowledge that what gave their request action and momentum is their “little” family’s story rather, than the grand narrative which the Church asks me to rehearse. These children are being brought towards the church with their closest guards not being the Communion of Saints but mother and father, and, even more tellingly, grandmother and grandfather.



Community

A multilayered concept of ‘community’ beckoned attractively to the parents of the children that I baptised. Community could and did mean more than one thing – family, neighbourhood, parish, age group, church local and universal (although not denominational).

This multilayering of the concepts of community is recognised beyond church issues. David McCrone, tracing changes in Scottish society over these last fifty years says:

Modernity aligned the national economy, polity and culture in such a way that citizenship and allegiance to the sovereign state provided a clear and dominant identity. Post-modernity on the other hand points to the limited nature of state sovereignty in an interdependent world, and stresses the highly contingent and multiple identities on offer to us. Organisation – in which people are relatively passive in how they are mobilised (‘the masses’, ‘the faithful’, even ‘the people’) – gives way to partial commitment and social movements which subvert the conventional ways of doing things. There is a shift from parties and churches to movements and sects.⁵



These changes of allegiance and the construction of individual identities are not confined to our country. Robert Wuthnow talks of how the church is faced with an impersonal society and the challenges which that poses for the creating and the sustaining of community.⁶ Robert Bellah claims that there is “an obsession today with personal interests, our feelings, our ambitions which is undermining bonds of community. Rather than the ‘Me Generation’ becoming the ‘We Generation’ it has only become the ‘Mine Generation.’”⁷

The changes in society, which McCrone defines as post-modern, have impacted heavily on formal church membership. Many of the parents who approach me are from that group which has decided against (or has never even thought of) church membership. It is paradoxical that the same societal trends which lead them away from the joining the church also play a large part in their seeking out of baptism for their young. The parents of children are acutely aware of the lack of community found in neighbourhood, working environment and scattered, broken families. Small wonder that, when looking at a child for whom they care so much, they instinctively seek a more human setting for them within a group (the local church) which they know to be committed to the notion of community. For some baptismal parents, having their child baptised in the church is a way of reaching back to a setting which nurtured them – home, family, sense of place, a feeling of belonging to somewhere and to some people. They may have long since left that setting but it has good memories for them and they want the same for their child. There is, perhaps, the unspoken prayer that the next generation may continue in those communities from which their parents have been estranged by such factors as distance, divorce, and short term contracts.

For these people there is a sense of baptism being linked very directly with the need for community and for the sense of belonging and identity which such community brings. It seems that the local church offers to some parents the promise of an immediate, ready-made community in terms of the place in which they live and among others nearby who are at the same stage of family life. There must be some question

about how distinctively Christian this motivation might be deemed to be. The specifically Christian component will no doubt vary from household to household. However, I do believe that this search for community is a good meeting ground for families to connect with a congregation like Colinton which is named after the place in which it serves, and has as its title “parish church”.

Robert J. Schreiter suggests in his discussion of future patterns of church life:

*It would seem to be the task of the Christian Church today to establish credible communities, places that encourage the power of ritual and group solidarity. In environments like these, practices can be cultivated and spiritualities evolved that could initiate people gradually and ever more deeply into the Christian mysteries.*⁸

For these baptismal parents, there seems to be a perception that Colinton Parish Church is a “credible community”. There is some evidence that they are, perhaps unwittingly, touched by “the power of ritual and group solidarity”. It is up to the congregation to take these perceptions and ambitions and follow through on Schreiter’s hope that in such a community people could “be gradually and ever more deeply” initiated into the Christian mysteries. If that could happen then this meeting point on the search for and the building of local community would be a promising starting point for the journey of a disciple.

My broad conclusion is that the request for a “parish baptism” is still a tremendous opportunity for the church. It is an opportunity which can be spurned by the legalist, spoiled by the cynical, and wasted by the handle-turner. Parents who ask for their child to be baptised are asking for a great deal and they deserve our respect and our support. A considered baptismal ministry demands time and energy from the minister and their congregation, but the prize of finding a new disciple is surely one worthy our best efforts.

After all, “Getting the wean done” could be a new beginning not just for the child, but also for the church which risks showing Christian hospitality to the stranger who comes to the gate.

¹ Matthew 28:19.

² Acts 2:39.

³ 1 Peter 2:9.

⁴ Luke 18:16.

⁵ David McCrone, “Understanding Scotland: A Sociological Perspective,” in *Seeing Scotland, Seeing Christ*. Edited by Gerard Hand. Centre for Theology and Public Issues Occasional Paper 28 (Edinburgh, University of Edinburgh, 1993).

⁶ Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1993).

⁷ Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press, 1985).

⁸ Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997).