

INTRODUCTION

FOR THE PAST twenty-five years Christian initiation has been an important concern of theology, both in the academic and in the pastoral spheres. In Britain, the Church of England and the Church of Scotland have undertaken major re-examinations of their theology and practice of initiation.¹ Theologians and pastors have been equally concerned with a renewed understanding and practice of initiation in many other countries, particularly in western Europe. There is a twofold existential occasion for this interest: the movement towards Christian unity has revealed the need to establish a theology and a practice of initiation acceptable to the denominations at present divided on this as on other issues, and (perhaps even more urgently) the increasing breakdown of the *corpus christianum* is driving almost all denominations to rethink their customary practices of initiation so that they may better reflect the present relations between the Church and the world.

A great deal of work has been done on the problems of initiation, but often in isolation of country from country, denomination from denomination, pastor from academic, biblical exegete from dogmatician, liturgical scholar from pastoral theologian. There seemed room, therefore, for an overall survey such as the one which follows. More, it is hoped that by the way of ordering the multifarious material, by the running commentary on it and by the conclusions finally drawn from it, the present essay may itself be of some use in the general task of elaborating a pattern of initiation which is truly ecumenical: grounded in the Scriptures and in the Tradition of the Church—making for, and then acceptable in, a visibly united Church embracing all Christians—and serving the proclamation of the gospel by the now divided and then united Church for the establishment of God's kingdom in the whole world.

Despite the writer's ecumenical intention, it is inevitable that some will find statements in a study of this kind which they do not consider to represent accurately their own denominational position: in so far as this is due not to the variety of opinions which is found within the

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denominations themselves but rather to my inadequate empathy into other traditions than my own Methodist, I ask for pardon.

The study starts with the New Testament theology of initiation, and particularly as this is reflected in the work of biblical scholars in recent years. The next chapters deal in turn with the three main patterns of initiation which have been practised in Church history—the total initiation of infants (by baptism, “confirmation” and first communion), the pattern according to which baptism is given to infants while “confirmation” and first communion are reserved for later years, and “believers’ baptism”; and in each case an evaluation of these patterns in their present circumstances is undertaken. The fifth chapter treats the relations between initiation and the unity of the Church from the viewpoints of theology, history and the contemporary movement towards churchly unity. The sixth is concerned with the role of initiation in the Church’s participation in God’s mission for the salvation of the world. In conclusion some consequences are drawn from the foregoing study for the elaboration of an ecumenical pattern of initiation.

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* Literature noted after the completion of the manuscript includes: Th. Maertens, *Histoire et pastorale du rituel du catéchuménat et du baptême*, Bruges, 1962; W. Bieder, *Die Verheissung der Taufe im Neuen Testament*, Zürich, 1966; L. L. Mitchell, *Baptismal Anointing*, London, 1966; T. C. Akeley, *Christian Initiation in Spain c. 300–1100*, London, 1967; K. Aland, *Die Stellung der Kinder in den frühen christlichen Gemeinden—und ihre Taufe*, 1967; *La Maison-Dieu*, no. 89 (1967), which is devoted to infant baptism; the international Catholic periodical *Concilium* 3 (1967), no. 22 (February), which issue deals with questions of initiation; *Baptism and Confirmation: a Report submitted by the Church of England Liturgical Commission to the Archbishops of Canterbury and York December 1966*, London, 1967; *Entry into the Church*, services authorized for experimental use by the British Methodist Conference 1967; A. Aubry, “Faut-il re-baptiser? Enquête historique et interrogations théologiques” in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 89 (1967), pp. 183–201; a long book by the American Baptist, D. Moody, *Baptism: Foundation for Christian Unity*, Philadelphia, 1967; and the new R.C. rite of infant baptism, on which see B. Fischer in *Notitiae*, Città del Vaticano, 4 (1968), pp. 235–45.