

***The Journey of Christian Initiation: theological and pastoral perspectives***

**Paul Avis (ed.)**

Church House Publishing £16.99

(978 0 7151 4237 0)

Not only do many local churches find the Common Worship baptism service difficult to use, the Church of England (like many others) faces some tricky questions over the theology and practice of Christian initiation. This collection of essays asks many of the right questions. It is the last product of the Faith and Order Advisory Group (FOAG) which has now been subsumed into a larger body in Church of England structures.

However, the key issue in view in this book is whether baptism is complete sacramental initiation (a position labelled BACSI by Paul Avis). To cut to the chase, these authors argue that it isn't and that confirmation is required too. Sixty years ago, that view would have commanded quite wide assent in the Church of England, at least in the more catholic quarters. But scholarship moves on and the scholarly consensus across western churches (except perhaps Roman Catholicism) is that baptism is in fact all that is needed for Christian initiation to be sacramentally complete. This book thus reads like an attempt to put the Church of England back into the 1950s.

Not only are the conclusions reached reactionary, some of the methods used hark back to a bygone age. Acts 8 and 19 (the Samaritan and Ephesian converts) are pressed into service as examples of the Holy Spirit being given via the laying on of hands subsequent to baptism. There is almost no engagement, though, with commentary on these texts or any real discussion of how normative they might be. Martin Davie even suggests that both pentecostal second blessing theologies and Anglican confirmation may be reconciled around these texts, seemingly unaware that James Dunn demolished such exegesis 40 years ago in his seminal book *The Baptism of the Holy Spirit*.

It is acknowledged that the early church's unified rite of initiation broke up in the west to produce separate services of baptism and what was later called confirmation. However, the historical material is handled carelessly with conclusions seemingly read into the patristic texts rather than from them. There is theological confusion too in that we are repeatedly told by these authors that baptism cannot be completed by confirmation but that confirmation is necessary to – what? - the authors clearly want to say 'complete' baptism but cannot bring themselves to.

They argue that Christian initiation is a journey, a viewpoint endorsed in much contemporary writing on the subject, but then the authors assume that this means baptism is somehow in need of supplementing. They completely misunderstand the theology underlying Common Worship initiation services on this matter. Affirming initiation and discipleship as process does not imply that old-fashioned two-stage views of initiation were right. Better to see (as Common Worship does) that baptism leads to a lifelong process of growing in faith. To their credit, the authors do not go the whole hog and argue that confirmation must precede admission to Holy Communion, but they are not overtly enthusiastic about communion before confirmation.

The centrality of confirmation is affirmed as the authentic Anglican position even when international Anglican statements say otherwise. These (and especially the Prayer Book of TEC) are viewed as being somehow aberrations from true Anglicanism. Much stress is laid, however, on Anglican-Baptist talks. Here it is suggested that if we return confirmation to a central role in initiation, we will find ourselves more able to be in agreement with Baptists. So many hares are set running here it would take a whole regiment of farmers to bag them. Meanwhile, 'staying behind' baptisms and an indiscriminate baptism policy are assumed to be the norm.

The authors of this volume do not include any liturgical scholars (except for the Chair of the

Liturgical Commission) and the liturgy books referenced in footnotes are generally a bit dated. This volume would have been immensely better had it been a dialogue between liturgists and members of FOAG (and why were there no liturgists on FOAG?) or even if the authors had held talks with those who might enter into dialogue about the BACSI position.

There are, though, a few sections of this book which are really helpful. Martin Davie on the NT texts is insightful (but not original) and Stephen Platten on the issues we now face is clear in setting them out and helpful in suggestion a few practical things we can do. All the authors are fine scholars in their own fields. Overall though, this is a very disappointing swansong for FOAG. It is to be hoped that the new structures will serve us better as regards theological reflection.

*Charles Read is Vice-Principal of the Norwich Diocese Ministry Course.*