

Rites of Initiation: Baptism & Group Membership

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Introduction

- What is the relationship between individual obligations to God (and/or the Church) which follow from baptismal promises and group obligations which follow from these baptismal promises?
- My thesis: Individual baptismal obligations (IBOs) should be understood as ‘membership obligations’, which derive their content from a set of group baptismal obligations (GBOs).

Individual and group obligations in baptism liturgy

Scottish Episcopal Church baptismal liturgy:

1. Introduction
2. A summary of God’s call to all people to be baptised
3. A turning from evil to Christ
4. A profession of faith (typically using the creeds)
5. A commitment to Christian life
6. A baptismal prayer said by the priest over the water
7. The baptism itself (by immersion or pouring)
8. Anointing of the candidate (typically using oil in the sign of the cross) and laying-on of hands
9. Giving of light (typically a lit candle)
10. Welcome

Baptism is initiation into a group:

N., God has received you by baptism into the Church
**We welcome you. We will care for you. We will share
our faith with you.**¹

To request baptism, whether for one’s self or for one’s child, is to opt freely for membership of *the Body of Christ*²

¹ *Holy Baptism*, Scottish Episcopal Church 2006, 8.

² *Holy Baptism*, 16; emphasis added.

The individual/ group structure of the liturgy:

GOD'S CALL

President God is love. God gives us life.
In Christ God reaches out to us.
In baptism God calls us to respond.
Do you accept this call?

Candidate I hear and accept God's call.
I ask for baptism.

God calls the Church to reflect Christ's glory, in baptism to declare his new life, in fellowship and mission to share it. Do you accept this call?

All **We hear and accept God's call³**

PROFESSION OF FAITH

President Do you believe in God the Father?

All **I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.**

President Do you believe in God the Son?

All **I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again; he ascended into heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again to judge the living and the dead [...]**

President This is the faith of the Church

Candidates *This is our faith.*

We believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

All **Amen.⁴**

³ *Holy Baptism*, 1.

⁴ *Holy Baptism*, 3.

COMMITMENT TO CHRISTIAN LIFE

President N., as a disciple of Christ will you continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in the prayers?

Answer *With the help of God, I will.*

President Will you proclaim the good news by word and deed, serving Christ in all people?

Answer *With the help of God, I will.*

President Will you work for justice and peace, honouring God in all Creation?

Answer *With the help of God, I will.*

President This is the task of the Church.

All **This is our task: to live and work for the kingdom of God.⁵**

The nature of obligations and promises (reduced)

- Darwall: 'In promising, a promiser gives a promisee an ensemble of rights and, therefore, the standing to make certain demands of him and to hold him answerable in certain ways.'⁶
- Gilbert on joint commitment:

the joint commitment to X as a body is a joint commitment to bring it about that, as far as is possible, the parties emulate a single body that Xs, and to do so in light of the joint commitment in question ... The guiding idea of *a single body* that Xs includes nothing about the intrinsic nature of the single body in question. In particular, it does not imply that it is in some way made up of

⁵ *Holy Baptism*, 5.

⁶ Darwall, S., 2011. Demystifying promises. *Promises and agreements*, edited by Hanoeh Sheinman, Oxford University Press, 260

two or more distinct bodies that are capable of X-ing on their own.⁷

- Promise as an act of joint commitment:

for one person to make a promise to another is for them jointly to commit themselves, by an appropriate, explicit process, to the decision that one of them (“the promisor”) is to perform one or more specified actions...in the paradigm case, one person makes a promise to another, and *both are active in the process of constructing the promise*. More precisely, the promisee must do something of an accepting rather than a rejecting nature.⁸

- On this view, IBO’s are a form of joint commitment with God to a certain way of living and believing.
- They also involve joint commitment to the other members of the Church. On this view, GBO’s are merely joint commitments to a certain way of living.
- *Limitations/ problems:* baptism is not best thought of purely in terms of membership to a particular local church community, but as an initiation into the universal Church. To state the task of the Church is ‘to live and work for the kingdom of God’ is not merely to say that the local community ought to live and work to the kingdom of God (although this might also be true), but to say that the whole Church is committed to living and working to the kingdom of God.
- Joint commitment sets too high a bar for claiming that large groups are committed to certain ways of acting or believing. For groups in which beliefs remain constant but members often leave (such as global organizations and corporations), Gilbert’s conditions appear too demanding.
- Whilst the commitments involved in baptism do result in certain expectations or responsibilities for the members of the Church,

⁷ Gilbert, Margaret. 2013. *Joint Commitment: How We Make the Social World*. Oxford University Press, 174-175.

⁸ Gilbert, Margaret. 2011. Three dogmas about promising. *Promises and Agreements*, edited by Hanoch Sheinman, Oxford University Press, 99

the beliefs are not *constituted* by these commitments, as in Gilbert's account. Instead, individuals commit to a set of beliefs which are already the beliefs of the Church. The Church is not the result of the joint commitments of its members, but the work of the Holy Spirit.

The Church as a collective

- Rather than understanding GBO's in relation to IBO's, I think we should understand IBO's in relation to GBO's. To do this, we need some group ontology.
- Collins' taxonomy: ,
 - A *coalition* is a group of individuals with a shared goal, but without a joint-decision making procedure. E.g., 'environmentalists', 'the oil lobby', 'democracy-promoting states', 'conservatives'⁹
 - A *combination* 'is constituted by agents who do not together constitute a coalition or a collective. E.g. "men" (since common advantage does not suffice for a common goal), "humanity", "the international community", "the people in this pub", and "me, you, and Shakespeare".¹⁰
 - A *collective* 'is constituted by agents that are united under a rationally operated group-level decision-making procedure that can attend to moral considerations.'¹¹ E.g. The British government is constituted by the ministers of the cabinet, who, through a series of group-decision making procedure, deliberate on the 'best' course of action for the country. Thus, a collective, unlike a combination or a coalition is united by its ontology, rather than by its shared goals, commitments, or accidental properties.
- Which one best fits the Church? I think we should think of the Church as a collective. See Underhill:

This total liturgical life of the *Corpus Christi* is not merely a collective of services, offices, and sacraments. Deeply considered, it is the sacrificial life of Christ Himself; the

⁹ Collins, S. 2019. *Group Duties*, Oxford University Press, 16

¹⁰ *Group Duties*, 20

¹¹ *Group Duties*, 12

Word indwelling in His Church, gathering in His eternal priestly action the small Godward movements, sacrifices, and aspirations of ‘all the broken and the meek,’ and acting through those ordered signs and sacraments by means of these His members on earth. Whether this Church be given hard and fast juridical boundaries, as in Roman Catholicism, or is seen as a group of autonomous families, as by Anglicans and Orthodox, or felt to be independent of visible expression, as by Quakers and other Independents, the principle is the same: the eternal self-offering of Christ to God in and through his mystical body. Hence the corporate worship of the Church is not simply that of an assembly of individuals who believe the same things, and therefore unite in doing the same things. It is real in its own right; an action transcending and embracing all the separate souls taking part in it. The individual as such dies to his separate selfhood—even his spiritual selfhood—on entering the Divine Society: is ‘buried in baptism’ and reborn as a living cell of the Mystical Body of Christ.¹²

- In being initiated by baptism into the one Church, then, one is baptised into the collective of the worldwide Church.
- On this ecclesiology, the Church acts as one body in spite of its apparent disunity because of the work of the one Spirit. Yet, at the same time, the Church acts sinfully because of the work of its sinful human members.¹³ Thus, when the baptism liturgy describes the *faith of the Church* and the *task of the Church*, they describe not only the obligations of those jointly committing in a particular context, but also the obligations of the collective of the worldwide Church.

¹² Underhill, Evelyn. 1936. *Worship*. Mayflower Press, 86

¹³ In certain respects, this ecclesiology is very similar to that offered by Bonhoeffer in *Sanctorum Communio*. The key difference is my engagement with contemporary social ontology to fill this account out.

Group duties

- A collective's...
decision is not merely the conjunction of members' decisions. The members' decisions were *to assent to the collective's doing such-and-such*. By contrast, the collective's decision was *to do such-and-such*. The collective's decision was determined by the members' decisions, but it is not to be identified with the mere conjunction of them for two reasons. First, it has a different content: "the collective's decision is "the collective will do this". Second, the collective's decision arose out of two things: the conjunction of member's decisions *plus* the fact that they are all committed to the unanimity rule.¹⁴
- Thus, unlike in the case of coalitions and combinations, the duties of collectives do not reduce to individual's duties. This also has implications for thinking about the duties of individual members of collectives too. On this account, if a collective has a duty to see to it that X, then
 1. Each member has a duty to use their role, if possible and as appropriate, to put inputs into the collective's decision-making procedure with a view to the procedure's distributing roles to members in a way that: if the enough members used their roles with a view to seeing it that X, then that would be sufficient for X in a high proportion of likely futures. These are "X-sufficient" roles.
 2. If X-sufficient roles are distributed, then each member has a duty to use their role, if possible and as appropriate, with a view to seeing to it that X.¹⁵
- Thus, 'when there is a violation at the collective level, there is *also* a violation at the member level. The two levels remain different...my claim is not that members failed to do *exactly what*

¹⁴ *Group Duties*, 169

¹⁵ *Group Duties*, 198

the collective failed to do...collectives' and members' duties really are over different things'.¹⁶

Baptism and group duties

- My account of GBOs: the Church as a collective has an obligation to uphold the claims of Christian orthodoxy (whatever these may be) and an obligation to *live and work for the kingdom of God* (or whatever the task of the Church may be).
- Rather than thinking of these duties and commitments as additions of the duties and commitments of the baptised, we should instead think of these as duties and commitments of the collective as a social body.
- IBO's in relation to GBO's: a commitment to *live and work for the kingdom of God* is not a shared goal of like-minded individuals (as in a joint commitment view), but a submission to the Church, in which one's individual actions to live and work for the kingdom of God are mysteriously united to the whole bodies. Whilst the promises of baptism involve certain commitments to certain ways of living (breaking of bread, fellowship, and prayer, for instance), the primary membership duty of those received into the Church, to extend Collins's terminology, is, to use one's role in response to the *collective's decision-making procedure* to thereby serve the collective's commitment to *living and working to the kingdom of God* (for example).
- If the Church is a collective, then the uniting actions of the Church are brought about by the work of the Holy Spirit. In other words, this is a decision-making procedure which surpasses any unity we might enforce through human organisational schemes.
- One's primary membership obligation then, is to discern the work of the Holy Spirit and act in conformity with it. It is in response to the work of the Holy Spirit, and not in virtue of dividing up roles amongst one another that members truly fulfil their duties in relation to the Church's duty. In Baptism, one is initiated into a collective, but a collective which is unlike any other human social body in that its primary agency is derived from divine action.

¹⁶ *Group Duties*, 183