

Rebaptism Calmly Reconsidered: Christian Initiation and Resistance in the Early AME Church of Jamaica, by SJ Grant

Eugene, Or. 2019. Pickwick. xv + pp. 146. No price quoted.
ISBN 978-1-5326-5299-8

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This book considers the rather sensitive topic of rebaptism, though in a specific context—that of the African Methodist Church in Jamaica. It is not a purely theological issue in this context, with a straightforward either/or solution, because it has a particular history which occurred within a particular socio-cultural context that emanated from the slave trade where Africans were forcibly transported to the colonies bringing their traditional cultures with them. The title phrase “calmly considered” emphasises the author’s intention, derived from John Wesley, to discuss the issue in a manner less bound by emotionalism and polemic.

The socio-cultural context described here laid the foundation for Jamaican congregants to include two water rituals in Christian initiation—a christening or sprinkling of water on infants, and immersion when the child has reached its majority. This appears to be a contradiction of Methodist teaching. This book offers John Wesley’s doctrine and practice of baptism alongside a discussion of the historical events, social events and cultural context in the nineteenth century. The use of two ceremonies became normative for many who wished to become members of the AME Church in Jamaica. This was an area in which there was considerable cross-cultural fertilisation and consequently, where the dynamism of the relational dialectical process produced a new synthesis.

This study proceeds from an attempt to identify a historical Wesleyan connection to this practice. Then, the rite of baptism by immersion is examined as related to the conversion of life of those baptised. This involved the retention of African culture through communal memory. Finally, the act of immersion and its symbolic link to liberation is



Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae
<https://upjournals.co.za/index.php/SHE/index>
Volume 46 | Number 1 | 2020 | #7146 | 2 pages

<https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/7146>
ISSN 2412-4265 (Online)
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Duncan

explored in context. This is a story of the relations which developed and existed between Wesleyan missionaries, the colonial planter class, and African slaves.

Clearly in this narrative, there was no understanding of the replacement of immersion by the ritual of sprinkling infants. Whatever the outcome, the use of water was mandatory “as the realm of the spirits and the birthplace of creation, therefore its symbolisation is thoroughly embedded in religion, spirituality, legends and rituals” (p.123). What emerges is a tension between our understandings of baptism as a birth rite and an act of initiation. What is interesting for us is the ease with which a two-rite understanding of baptism was integrated. This approach might provide thought for those of us who have a static view of the sacrament of baptism as the sole means of entry into the fellowship of Christ’s church.