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Some Recent Trends in the Theology of Baptism

ACCORDING to G. W. H. Lampe,¹ fifty years have passed since Bishop Westcott prophesied that the next great theological controversy would be centred upon Baptism, and there are many signs that the controversy which he expected is now developing. Discussions on ecumenicity have made it plain that one subject which requires careful thought is that of Baptism, and as a result scholars of all denominations have turned their attention to it. Further evidence for the importance of the subject is seen in the fact that some of the scholars have even turned aside from what may be considered as their main work in order to deal with it, and in consequence we have the writings of men like Barth, Brunner, and Cullmann. In each branch of the Church, moreover, there appears to be a growing uneasiness on the issue so that men are less ready to publish a defence of their views than they are to examine them again in the light of modern scholarship. Thus it is that to some extent the New Testament scholars come into their own concerning the origin of the rite, and the students of early Church History concerning its development. A wave of books, articles and pamphlets has come from the press in recent years, and it is our intention to see what new developments have been made in recent years concerning faith and infant baptism.

BAPTISM AND CONVERSION

If we turn to the New Testament there can be little doubt that there baptism and conversion are very closely linked and that, in fact, baptism is the recognised declaration of an inner change in the heart of man. This is a view which is now widely acknowledged on all sides by scholars of varied persuasions.

Perhaps the clearest exposition of the truth is to be found in Flemington's study of New Testament Baptism.² Here the writer shows that the two ideas most frequently linked with baptism in the *Acts of the Apostles* are those of "hearing the word" and "believing." (ii. 37-38, 41; viii. 12, 13, 35-36; xvi. 14-15, 32-33; xviii. 8; xix. 5). In the Epistles, baptism is linked more with justification, sanctification and the new life.³ (1 *Cor.* vi. 9-11; *Gal.*

¹ *The Seal of the Spirit*, vii.

² *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*, pp. 49, 110, 116. Cf. Flemington, "An Approach to the Theology of Baptism," in *The Expository Times*, vol. lxii, (1950-51), p. 357.

³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 55ff. 99f.

iii. 26-29; *Rom.* vi. 1-4; *Col.* ii. 9-13; *Eph.* iv. 30, v. 25-27; *I Peter* iii. 18-21; *Titus* iii. 4-7). But we can give thanks that no one has really questioned the facts which Flemington has brought forth. On the contrary it is somewhat surprising to notice how many scholars agree with his findings.

As early as 1923, for example, W. M. Clow⁴ had written that the two sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper were valid according to the New Testament only when accompanied by faith. Later in the same work⁵ Clow maintains that apostolic baptism was a sacrament which symbolised and confirmed the significance of the profession of faith in Jesus Christ, as the Redeemer, from the guilt and power of sin, by the use of water, and that according to Paul the dynamic of baptism is the life of the believer, and its blessings are only for the man who has believed.

Less than twenty years later, H. G. Marsh⁶ had drawn attention to the complete break in a man's life which New Testament baptism symbolised, and pointed out that it was then a symbol of something which had already happened and was closely connected with entry to the Kingdom of God. He subsequently made it clear⁷ that in the New Testament baptism was an experience symbolised by the performance of a rite and not a rite which conveyed a particular interpretation; in others words the New Testament stress was on the faith and not on the rite.

In 1948, Barth⁸ declared that New Testament baptism is always a response to faith and answers the desire for a sealing of that faith. He supports his argument by reference to *Acts* viii. 28ff; x. 44ff; xvi. 13ff, 32ff; xviii. 8ff. In another place⁹ he interprets baptism as the candidate's pledge of allegiance to God.

That this should have been argued fervently by Baptists is not at all surprising, and it has been put forth by H. Wheeler Robinson,¹⁰ H. Cook,¹¹ P. W. Evans,¹² H. Townsend,¹³ E. A. Payne,¹⁴ and others. What is more remarkable, however, is that it should be found in the writings of members of other communions, as, for instance, when the Bishop of Derby¹⁵ says that from the beginning

⁴ *The Church and the Sacraments*, p. 26.

⁵ pp. 92, 105, 111.

⁶ *The Origin and Significance of New Testament Baptism*, pp. 189ff.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 202-203, 205.

⁸ *The Teaching of the Church regarding Baptism* (trans. by E. A. Payne), p. 42.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁰ *Baptist Principles*, pp. 8, 13, 17.

¹¹ *What Baptists Stand For*, pp. 105, 109f.

¹² *Infant Baptism Today*, p. 26.

¹³ *Infant Baptism Today*, p. 41.

¹⁴ *The Doctrine of Baptism*, p. 4.

¹⁵ A. E. J. Rawlinson, *Christian Initiation*, pp. 7, 24.

Christian initiation¹⁶ was linked with the forgiveness of sins and was followed by a new kind of life, and the Archbishops' commission on "Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion" acknowledges that the note of personal response is conspicuous in the theology of initiation in the New Testament.¹⁷

Even E. J. Bicknell¹⁸ acknowledges that in Scripture baptism signified the public acknowledgement of Jesus as Lord, and that the blessings of baptism flow from the union with Christ thus gained,¹⁹ whilst the same truth underlies the remarks of P. T. Forsyth²⁰ when he says that baptism is the sacrament of the new birth; it does not produce the regeneration but richly conveys it by our personal experience into its home. R. E. Davies,²¹ similarly, has agreed that in the New Testament baptism was closely linked with repentance and faith. Reference here might also be made to Sanday and Headlam,²² C. H. Dodd,²³ E. F. Scott,²⁴ Vincent Taylor,²⁵ Norman Snaith,²⁶ and R. R. Williams,²⁷ to mention a few of the most accessible.

For many, notably the Baptists, that is adequate, but it has nevertheless been pointed out that although baptism and faith do in fact go together in the New Testament they need not necessarily do so, and as E. A. Payne has reminded the Baptists,²⁸ they need not think that their case is universally conceded for, outspoken as

¹⁶ That the Bishop of Derby means slightly more than Baptism by this phrase does not destroy the point since baptism is included in it.

¹⁷ *The Theology of Christian Initiation*, p. 12.

¹⁸ *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*, pp. 466ff.

¹⁹ The way in which Bicknell argues from these premises will be seen subsequently.

²⁰ *The Church and the Sacraments*, pp. 209f.

²¹ "Christian Initiation: the Doctrine in the New Testament," in *Friends of Reunion Bulletin*, No. 39 (1951), pp. 3ff.

²² *The Epistle to the Romans*, (ICC), pp. 153f., 162f.

²³ *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 86f. J. K. S. Reid ("Theological Issues involved in Baptism," in the *Expository Times*, vol. lxi (1949-50), p. 202), objects to this reference on the grounds that Dodd (*op. cit.*, p. 86) explicitly states that the validity of infant baptism is simply not in question, and also to the above references in Sanday and Headlam on the ground that they do not mention infant baptism. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to see how the interpretation which these writers place on baptism could receive its full expression where the baptism was that of unconscious infants. This is not cited here as a reason for the validity of infant baptism, but only as evidence that the type of baptism with which the Apostle was familiar when he wrote these words was something more akin to that of believers than to that of infants.

²⁴ *The Pastoral Epistles*, pp. 77, 176.

²⁵ *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, p. 136.

²⁶ *The Methodist Recorder*, 17th June, 1948.

²⁷ "Baptism," in A. Richardson (ed.), *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, pp. 27ff.

²⁸ *The Doctrine of Baptism*, p. 7.

these scholars are in regard to the weakness of their own Church's theory and practice, they do not become Baptists. This is surely of the utmost importance if the Baptists are not going to settle down with the battle half won. Besides, so much has been written on the other side. Leenhardt²⁹ is one who has no doubt that in the New Testament baptism concerns adolescents or adults, but he makes it equally clear that he does not believe the issue can be settled so easily.

Cullmann³⁰ has gone further. He declares that it is a mistake to conclude too hastily either that the confessional character of the early Church is tied to baptism or that faith and confession are pre-conditions of a significant and regular baptism. He agrees that adult baptism in primitive Christianity is indeed an important occasion for confessing the faith but it is not the *only* occasion, and the confessional character of the Church does not stand or fall with it. Here Cullmann supports his thesis by reference to Irenaeus who, long before Constantine, affirmed infant baptism though standing within a confessional Church. Later³¹ he argues that faith only preceded baptism in the New Testament because we are dealing with Christians of the first generation, and that even there faith is not really integral to the act. He then goes on to say that the Church should pray for those who are baptized in order that the baptism may lead to faith. What counts, for Cullmann, however, at the moment of baptism is the faith of those who *bring* rather than of those who are brought. He even says that the New Testament knows of baptisms which do not presuppose faith before and during the act itself, and he refers to the members of the household of the Philippian gaoler (*Acts* xvi. 31).

Though there are undoubtedly points here which other writers have taken up, it would perhaps be wiser to consider first some of the weaknesses of Cullmann's position. No one has said, for instance, that the occasion of baptism was the *only* occasion for a confession of faith; what has been argued is that baptism is linked with a man's *first* confession of faith and is a public declaration of the same, and with that fact Cullmann has not fully dealt. Secondly, if faith only accompanied baptism in the case of the first generation Christians, why is it that believers' baptism continued in some places for such a long time and only died a gradual death as infant baptism was introduced?³² Thirdly, if Cullmann's

²⁹ "Pédobaptisme catholique et Pédobaptisme réformé," in *Etudes Théologiques et religieuses*, vol. 25, (1950), p. 146.

³⁰ *Baptism in the New Testament*, p. 28.

³¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 47ff.

³² For a further development of this point see section on Infant Baptism or Believer's Baptism.

view is right, E. A. Payne³³ would say that we might almost go on to ask why the children of Christians need be baptized at all. Moreover, as Payne also points out,³⁴ Cullmann carefully avoids the situation that has arisen in Churches that have separated baptism and faith. Finally, it is not inappropriate to recall the words of Barth,³⁵ when he says: "In the sphere of New Testament baptism one is not brought to baptism, one comes to baptism."

In so far as Cullmann tries to argue for a separation of faith and baptism in the New Testament, therefore, he is seen to be fighting against a rising tide of opinion, but in so far as he argues it is the basis of a necessary change which took place in the early history of the Church, he commands more respect and has more support. Thus the issue changes from what happened in the New Testament to what the rite was meant to convey and how best its meaning could be interpreted.

N. P. Williams³⁶ may be regarded as typical of a certain school of thought when he acknowledges that the custom of baptizing unconscious infants seems to have grown up spontaneously on the basis of popular feeling, and not on any reasoned theory. "That infants may and should be baptized," he declares, "is a proposition which rests solely upon the actual practice of the Church." And he goes on to add that in his view this reason is sufficient.³⁷

It is nevertheless not sufficient for those who still try to see a connection between faith and baptism, even though the baptism may be that of infants. The Report on the Archbishops' Theological Commission on "Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion,"³⁸ takes up this question and agrees that justification is by faith and that baptism is the sign and seal of the justifying grace of God whereby the redeemed sinner becomes the child of God. In the case of an unconscious infant, however, it should be noted that the element of faith is still there, though it is the faith of the sponsors that is important, and hence the stress on the child's instruction and examination in the faith before Communion. The God-parents are even described as "effective guarantors of the child's own faith and repentance." R. E. Davies³⁹ also stresses the element of faith in the congregation.

At the same time, it is never clearly stated how anyone can be a

³³ "Professor Oscar Cullmann on Baptism," in *The Baptist Quarterly*, vol. xiv, (1952), pp. 59ff.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 42.

³⁶ *The Ideas of the Fall and of Original Sin*, pp. 550ff.

³⁷ Cf. E. J. Bicknell, *op. cit.*, p. 474.

³⁸ *The Theology of Christian Initiation*, pp. 16, 22.

³⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

guarantor of the faith of another, especially if that "other" be a child of a few weeks old.⁴⁰ Cullmann⁴¹ is undoubtedly right when he says that even in the case of believer's baptism the faith which is there confessed is no guarantee of a *later faith*, but experience would indicate that such a confession is much more likely to result in a later faith than when it is only made by sponsors.

There is here a need for clear thinking. There appear to be two possibilities. *Either* we may say that the Church, in the course of her history, has changed the meaning of baptism so that it is no longer a public confession of faith, but rather a symbol of God's free offer of salvation to all His children, in which case the issue is whether the Church was right in making such a change, *or* we may say that baptism and faith ought still to go together, in which case it seems difficult, if not impossible, to justify the practice of infant baptism. Should it become clear, however, that the latter alternative is to be adopted, it would undoubtedly mean that a new and weighty responsibility had been laid upon the advocates of believer's baptism to decide more definitely what is the relationship between believer's baptism and faith.

In recent years, it has seemed to many anti-Peodobaptists that to represent baptism as nothing more than a public declaration of faith leads to an inadequate view of the rite. C. T. Craig⁴² hardly gives a fair presentation of the position of Baptists in this country, at any rate, when he suggests that they contend that baptism is not spiritually efficacious in any sense, but is simply symbolical and declarative, and that they prefer the term "ordinance" for "sacrament." As early as 1925, H. Wheeler Robinson⁴³ declared that New Testament baptism meant for Paul, at any rate, an experiential union with Christ, and since then many Baptists have abandoned the merely symbolical view in favour of a more sacramental interpretation.⁴⁴

The real difficulty, however, is to decide the precise connection between faith and baptism. There are two pitfalls.⁴⁵ On the one hand there is the danger of saying that believer's baptism actually confers grace as an *ex opere operato* rite. On the other hand, there is the danger of saying that believer's baptism merely confirms in the heart of the believer a faith which he already possesses. Though the defendants of believer's baptism have fled in terror from the first of these alternatives, there are several indications that they would be willing to embrace the second, which, though

⁴⁰ Cf. Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

⁴¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁴² *The One Church in the Light of the New Testament*, p. 75.

⁴³ *Baptist Principles*, p. 13.

⁴⁴ A. C. Underwood, *A History of the English Baptists*, pp. 268f.

⁴⁵ Cf. B. Citron, *New Birth*, p. 135.

containing much that is true, seems to lead to a somewhat stunted view of baptism. In fact, it tends to make conversion the sacrament and baptism little more than an appendage.⁴⁶ Though this view, as such, has never been propagated as the teaching of any particular branch of the Church, the fact that it prevails among the rank and file of many people in the Churches suggest inadequate teaching on the subject. O. C. Quick⁴⁷ believes that the sacraments, and particularly baptism, have real value in that they join together into a visible fellowship and common obedience in spiritual things people of quite different types,⁴⁸ whilst they afford to the outsider the clear appreciation of something definite and specific into which he is being asked to come. He admits that individuals can be, and undoubtedly are, saved without baptism, but that the Church would be a poorer Church if the sacraments did not exist. In what ways, therefore, can the close connection between faith and baptism be stressed so as to heighten the popular conception of the latter without detracting from the former?

To stress this connection we should no doubt do well, first, to emphasise again the teaching of Calvin⁴⁹ that baptism is the means by which a man is made more fully aware of what has happened in his conversion. This surely would take us one stage further towards an appreciation of the value of baptism, than the simple assertion that in the New Testament, baptism was the believers' normal and natural way of expressing faith,⁵⁰ or that it was the external counterpart of the inward attitude of repentance and faith.⁵¹

Secondly, we need to rid ourselves of a false distinction, which is all too common, between faith and rites. Leenhardt⁵² says that such a distinction is false because it is contrary to both history and psychology, where we learn that the inner life is only intelligible in so far as it comes out in every aspect of a man's being, and James Denney⁵³ said much the same when he declared that baptism and faith are "the outside and the inside of the same thing."

In this respect it is of some value to compare baptism to the

⁴⁶ The result of this can be clearly seen in that it leads to unbaptised persons being admitted to membership. Cf. R. C. Walton, *The Gathered Community*, p. 165.

⁴⁷ *The Christian Sacraments*, p. 178.

⁴⁸ R. E. Davies ("Christian Initiation: the Doctrine in the New Testament," in *Friends of Reunion Bulletin*, No. 39, (1951), p. 4), says that in the New Testament baptism is the symbol of Christian unity.

⁴⁹ *Institutes*, iv. 15.

⁵⁰ W. F. Flemington, *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*, p. 123.

⁵¹ W. F. Flemington, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

⁵² *Le Baptême Chrétien*, p. 41.

⁵³ *The Death of Christ*, p. 185.

symbolism practised by the Old Testament Prophets. John's baptism has more than once been regarded in this light,⁵⁴ and there is every reason to believe that the early Christians, many of whom were Jews, interpreted their baptism along the same lines. The important point about prophetic symbolism was that the Prophets themselves did not make a distinction between the word they spoke and the act they performed⁵⁵; W. M. Clow⁵⁶ says the Prophets penetrated past the mere rite and past the mere symbol to the spiritual truth symbolised, whilst at the same time H. Wheeler Robinson⁵⁷ reminds us that such acts were more than a mere duplication of the spoken word.

To think thus does not come naturally to a western mind, but it seems to the present writer that if we could bring ourselves to see God's salvation, made real to us in our conversion, profession of faith, and the subsequent act of baptism as three parts of one and the same act, we should have gone a long way to a New Testament understanding of the sacrament, which is definitely linked with man's faith but is more than a mere appendage to conversion. Such an interpretation also seems to be in harmony with that of Bicknell⁵⁸ when he says that baptism in Scripture is not only a sign of profession but a means of grace, that the blessings of baptism flow from union with Christ, and that baptism is an effectual sign of regeneration or new birth, in that it not only symbolises the new birth but conveys it. Furthermore, we should have established a more definite view of baptism as an essential rite than the one which most advocates of believer's baptism today possess, and it would consequently be more difficult for the Paedobaptists to attack it or disregard it.⁵⁹ Add to this the value of such an act for the candidate, and we have an interpretation of baptism which we could confidently put forward in any discussions on reunion.

It has nevertheless been argued by N. P. Williams, as we have seen, and also by others, that the Church was right to change the normal mode of baptism, and so we turn to the second part of our discussion.

A. GILMORE.

(To be Continued)

⁵⁴ W. F. Flemington, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-22; Leenhardt, *op. cit.*, pp. 12ff., cf. "Leenhardt on Baptism," in *The Baptist Quarterly*, vol. xv, (1953), pp. 35ff.

⁵⁵ Cf. H. Wheeler Robinson, "Prophetic Symbolism," in *Old Testament Essays*, (1927), pp. 1-17.

⁵⁶ *The Church and the Sacraments*, p. 69.

⁵⁷ *Loc. cit.*

⁵⁸ *Op cit.*, pp. 466ff.

⁵⁹ One of Bicknell's criticisms of believer's baptism is that it reduces baptism to little more than an aid to faith. (*Op. cit.*, pp. 472f.)