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The Doctrine of Baptism

BY DONALD ROBINSON

I HOPE I do not start off on the wrong foot if I surmise that some evangelical clergy are less enthusiastic about the glory of our liturgy when it comes to the baptismal services than when they speak of the Prayer Book in general. There is an impression abroad that our Reformers did not manage to revise the service of baptism as thoroughly as they did the communion office. Our service is better known for the embarrassment it causes some of our brethren than for its Reformed theology! If we are not, perhaps, very loyal churchmen, we conduct it with glosses and emendations of our own; and, even if we are loyal, we say some parts of it very quickly!

Let it be said at once, however, that Archbishop Cranmer, and those associated with him, did pay careful attention to the theology of baptism, even though baptism did not occupy the same prominence in the controversies of the time as did the Lord's supper. As a matter of fact, Cranmer's baptismal service, which is the one we still use, differs more extensively from the Sarum Use than does any other service which he compiled. Two other circumstances of the Reformation suggest to us that Cranmer and his friends are not likely to have been nodding when they introduced the people of England to new baptismal services. First is the fact—to which Dr. D. B. Knox has recently drawn attention in his newly published book, *The Doctrine of Faith in the Reign of Henry VIII*—that justification by faith only had been clearly grasped and vigorously expounded by our English theologians in book after book during the twenty years before the first English Prayer Book appeared. For Cranmer himself nothing was more central than this doctrine. He applied it with profound insight to the nature of worship no less than to personal religion. Nor was he ignorant that justification touches baptism very closely indeed. It would be surprising, therefore, if in his baptismal service he did not give a consistent picture of this cardinal doctrine. Secondly, it is worth recalling that our English Reformers did not work alone. They were conscious of standing on the same ground as the Protestant leaders of other churches, both Lutheran and Reformed. They were anxious that the formularies they produced for their own people should be submitted to the scrutiny of their friends abroad, and should express, as far as possible, the common faith of the Reformation. Dr. Geoffrey Bromiley has pointed out that "in their basic theology of baptism the Anglicans not only agreed substantially with the Protestant churches abroad, but they were proud of that agreement".¹ They did not have, if we may say so, the inhibitions about intercommunion which have arisen more recently among us. Consequently, it mattered to them that they should walk in step with their brethren in those things which concerned the nature of the visible Church. The due administration of the sacraments was one of these things.

For our Church's doctrine of baptism we must go first of all to the Thirty-Nine Articles. The Prayer Book services must always be interpreted in accordance with the Articles, and not the other way about. There is also the section of the Catechism dealing with the sacraments. This, as you know, was added in 1604 at the request of the leading Puritan divines of our Church; and it also is secondary to the Articles. Article XXVII, *Of Baptism*, was, as a matter of fact, drawn up in 1552, the same year that the second form of the baptismal service—virtually that which we now have in the 1662 Book—was composed. I should like now to speak briefly about two things: first on what may be called the "sacramental idiom" used by the compilers of our services, and secondly on their theology. The two, of course, are closely linked. But there is some advantage in dealing with the sacramental language or idiom separately, as it is not always understood.

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The Sacramental Idiom. Article XXVII defines baptism as "a sign of regeneration or new birth, whereby, as by an instrument . . . the promises of forgiveness of sin, and of our adoption to be the sons of God by the Holy Ghost, are visibly signed and sealed". In biblical terminology, this means that baptism is a covenant. For a covenant is simply an instrument for signing and sealing a promise. Where a person stands to this covenant, and formally accepts its terms, he has the external sign of Christian profession. The covenant procedure is reflected in our services in the words: "after this promise made by Christ, you must also faithfully, for your part, promise", and so on. Now it is this idea of baptism as a covenant or instrument which accounts for the unqualified assertion: "seeing now that this person is regenerate". This is stated as the logical consequence of the two earlier assertions: God's promise, and man's response. We need have no doubt about God's promise. But we cannot be certain in the same way about man's faith. Nevertheless, we accept the profession, and state the guarantee. It is of the nature of covenants and suchlike instruments to speak in this absolute idiom.

Some people, however, have naturally felt a difficulty in applying this covenantal idea of baptism to a child, since a child is incapable of the faith which seems essential to the contract. Luther and some of his followers went so far as to suppose that there must be a kind of incipient faith in the child himself. Others have thought that the faith of the sponsors is accepted vicariously for the child's. But neither of these views is held by the Church of England. The faith which is voiced in the service by sponsors is the child's own faith, though it is a faith he does not possess as yet. But the sponsors are confident that he will one day have such faith—for reasons we shall be looking at in a moment—and so the faith of the child is, we may say, formally represented at the covenant ceremony. And so when we go on to say: "seeing now that this child is regenerate", we are not asserting that the child is actually regenerate, but that he is sacramentally or figuratively regenerate. Cranmer, in his answer to Gardiner, defends this sacramental "manner of speech" (as he calls it) in connection with the child's profession of faith in baptism. "We

ought not to be reprehended as vain men or liars," he says, "forasmuch as in common speech we use daily to call sacraments and figures by the names of the things that be signified by them, although they be not the same thing indeed".³ In other words, the child's faith is sacramentally represented at baptism, though it does not yet exist. Likewise, we say that the child is regenerate, meaning that he has received the visible sign and seal of regeneration. Whether he is actually regenerate, rests on other grounds than the mere receiving of the sacrament. And this brings us to another aspect of baptism.

There is more to baptism than the sacramental form which we have been discussing. One might get the idea, from that form alone, that regeneration can only occur after the exercise of personal faith. For in the formal, covenantal structure, there is declared, first, the promise of God, then the confession of faith; then, after baptism, the benefit of regeneration is declared. But the Reformers did not in fact hold that regeneration was the product of personal faith and conversion. This may be a common way of speaking today, but it was not their idea. They held that faith was the gift of God, and therefore it was the product of the prior work of God in the soul.³ This prior work of God they seem to have associated with the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, and this, in turn, they associated with the promise of God to be the God both of the elect and of their children. So, for them, the baptismal service was not only a visible sign of regeneration, in the sense already discussed, but was also an occasion for the believing congregation to direct its prayer towards the promises of Scripture. Article XXVII also tells us that, in baptism, "faith is confirmed, and faith increased, *by virtue of prayer unto God*". Not, of course, by any sort of prayer, but by prayer which calls upon God to grant what He has promised. Nothing is more typical of Cranmer himself than this underlining of the promise of God as the ground of all effectual prayer and all expectation of grace. In all his forms of absolution he was careful to include a reference to scriptural promises.⁴ To the Litany and the daily services he added the Prayer of St. Chrysostom. Why did he trouble to extract that one pearl of great price from the Orthodox Liturgy? I have no doubt that it was because of its reference to those promises of Christ which are the ground of all corporate prayer. Likewise was Cranmer careful to annex the due promises of God to both the sacraments. Now the point of Article XXVII is, that the prayer of the believing Church is what enables baptism to be associated with the actual benefit of regeneration, and not merely with its visible sign. Moreover, the actual benefit of regeneration is available even to a child. But it does not rest on baptism as such; it comes through believing prayer directed to the promise of God.

It must be recognized, however, that since Laudian times there has grown up an interpretation of the language of our liturgy different from that intended by the first compilers of our liturgy. Consequently, when new services are drawn up, we are unable to interpret them with the same confidence as to their intention, even where some of the old phraseology is retained. It must also be admitted that there are subtleties in the sacramental idiom of the Reformers which are quite lost on the twentieth century congregation (not to say the twentieth

century clergyman). For these two reasons, our wisdom would be to retain the general structure and content of our present services, and try to make their meaning clear. In particular, it would be wise to omit the assertion that the baptized person is regenerate, simply to obviate misunderstanding,⁵ and in the thanksgiving that follows we might model the wording on that of the thanksgiving after communion. Thus, instead of saying, "We give thee hearty thanks that it hath pleased thee to regenerate this infant with thy Holy Spirit", we might propose these words: "We yield thee hearty thanks that thou hast vouchsafed to regenerate with thy Holy Spirit this infant, who has duly received this holy sacrament". (I should hope we could find a modern equivalent for "vouchsafe"; but here I want to emphasize the parallel with the Communion prayer.) This would at least indicate more explicitly that our confidence rests on the promise of God, and not on any theory about the actual effects of a sacramental rite.⁶

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The Theology of our Services. Let us look now at the doctrinal content of our services. Here we see baptism in its true glory as a sacrament of the Gospel. For we find a rich and thoroughly biblical presentation of what salvation is, and how it may be obtained. We stand in need of salvation from our first incorporation into Adam until we finally pass the waves of this troublesome world. For like the psalmist we are conceived and born in sin, and in that condition subject to God's wrath. And if we are to be saved, our salvation must rest on the mercy and will of God. Two scriptural promises in particular seem to pervade our services. The first was Peter's text at the baptism of Pentecost: "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2: 21). The other is the word of Christ: "How much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him?" (Lk. 11: 13). We find, too, that the Old Testament patterns of salvation are Noah and his family, and God's people Israel at the exodus. A child of Christian parents is not exempted from the necessity of regeneration. His birth does not save him, but he is, by birth, brought into the sphere of God's covenant, and he becomes the subject of fervent prayer. And God's election of grace, like all His promises, becomes effectual through prayer.

May I say a word here about Christ's blessing of the children. The Liturgical Commission claims that this incident in Mark 10 "has no obvious connection with baptism". Of course, if our concern is only with the outward sign, this is true. But what does the baptism of infants signify if not that God is able and willing to grant the blessings of His covenant of grace to children who are brought to Christ "that he should touch them"? So this passage, containing Christ's word that "of such children is the kingdom of God", is of quite central importance to our prayer for the salvation of young children. It holds out the promise of which their baptism is a sign.

Salvation, in our services, is set out in various terms drawn from the Scriptures. It is a new birth; it is becoming a child of God by adoption; it is receiving the Holy Spirit; it is being baptized and sanctified by the Spirit; it is cleansing and the forgiveness of sins; it is being

made an heir of everlasting salvation and an assurance of the resurrection to eternal life ; it is being incorporated into the Church, the body of Christ, the elect people of God. And all is grounded in the death and passion of Christ, who was Himself baptized in the river Jordan, and " who for the forgiveness of our sins did shed out of his most precious side both water and blood ". Our salvation is such a partaking of the death of God's son that the old Adam is buried and the new man raised up. And for all this a man must renounce the devil and all his works, and constantly believe God's holy Word, and obediently keep His commandments. No lack of texts here, for a man who wishes to preach the Gospel at a baptismal service!

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It will, I hope, be apparent from what I have said that there are two features of our services, in particular, which are much to be esteemed. It is to be hoped that they will characterize any revision of our Prayer Book.

1. The first is the way in which baptism is represented as the sacrament of *complete* incorporation into Christ. Christian initiation should not be thought of, as some do, as a long process including confirmation and culminating in receiving communion for the first time. This post-biblical notion derogates from the proper meaning and dignity of baptism. Valuable as confirmation is as a pastoral office, providing an opportunity for a personal confession of the faith declared in baptism, it should not usurp, nor appear to usurp, the role of baptism as the sacrament of the giving of the Spirit. There is plenty of room for further theological reflection on baptism and its related doctrines, particularly, I think, in relating baptism to the death of Christ. But the biblical data are pretty well all there in our present services, and we should guard against having a form in which baptism becomes a sacrament of only part of the Gospel, and not of the whole.

2. The second feature is the active role of the congregation, especially in the baptism of infants. No one can read our services without being aware that the promises of Scripture are the whole foundation of the sacrament. Along with this goes an urgent insistence that the congregation should direct their prayer to these promises. You find it in the first address to those present, in the two prayers that follow, in the homily on the Gospel and its attached prayer, in the address to the godparents, and in the prayer before the baptism. This feature has shrunk almost to nothing in the draft services of the Liturgical Commission. This, it may be suspected, is because its attention has been diverted to the quite unbiblical idea that a prayer for the blessing of the water should be the central prayer of the service.' We are reminded of a comment Cranmer once made to Henry VIII. The king had made certain corrections to the *Bishops' Book*, and sent them to Cranmer for comment. The Archbishop found that Henry had deleted the reference to God's promise of forgiveness in the form of absolution in the anointing of the sick. The annotation he sent back to Henry was brief and to the point. " The promise ", he said, " is stricken out, which chiefly ought to be known' ".⁸ No such charge

can be laid against our baptismal service. It is the promise of God's covenant which chiefly ought to be known, in a baptismal office. It ought to be held out *as* a promise, and the people urged to lay hold on it through prayer.

Some of the problems we encounter in regard to baptismal discipline might disappear if the role of the believing congregation were to become a reality. Our Reformers considered that a praying people were indispensable to the due administration of baptism. Even in private baptism it is required that those who are present with the minister should "call upon God, and say the Lord's Prayer" before proceeding to baptize. In 1549 and 1552, one of the questions to be asked afterwards, in order to certify that the child had been lawfully and sufficiently baptized, was this: "Whether they called upon God for his grace and succour in that necessity". By contrast, the new draft services do not require any prayer at all to be offered before the administration of private baptism. The congregation again appears in the regular services in the person of the sponsors. These days, sponsors tend to be uncles or friends who come from far, but our Prayer Book probably assumed that they would be members of the congregation. One reason why they are not the parents of the child is probably because they are, in effect, vouching to the congregation for the Christian integrity of the parents who have sought baptism for their child. And if the profession made by the sponsors on behalf of the child is to be credible to the congregation, they must presumably be themselves known to the congregation. The historical question of godparents is admittedly confused, but we should not too easily assume that the canonical objection to parents standing as godparents for their own children is merely a hangover from the medieval idea of spiritual affinity. Dr. Sherwin Bailey points out that our Church repudiated that idea at the Reformation, though it retained the prohibition against parents being sponsors,⁹ which is still the law of this Church.¹⁰ The only question I ask in connection with this, is whether it does not reflect a valuable view of the place of the Church in baptism. Our services have the feature, unique among liturgies, I think, of the receiving of the baptized person into the congregation immediately after being baptized. This, too, has disappeared from the draft services. No one can be unaware of the pastoral problems associated with baptism in the modern situation. But few of them are likely to find a satisfactory solution until baptism becomes a truly integral part of the prayerful concern and responsibility of the local congregation, and in this matter, our liturgy at least gives us an ideal.

The glory of our baptismal liturgy is the glory of the Gospel of which the sacrament is a witness and a pledge. Our Prayer Book exhibits that Gospel with fidelity to the truth as it is in Scripture. Our services cannot, in this respect, be modified, without reproach to the Gospel, and peril to ourselves.

NOTES

⁹ *Baptism and the Anglican Reformers*, 1953, p. 224.

¹⁰ Book III of *An Answer unto a Crafty and Sophistical Cavillation*; Parker Society, Vol. I, p. 125.

² For a helpful discussion of some of the problems involved in this subject, see the late Archdeacon T. C. Hammond's book, *The New Creation*, 1953.

³ See D. B. Knox, *The Doctrine of Faith in the Reign of Henry VIII*, p. 168.

⁴ Other Reformed liturgies, which adopt the same covenantal idiom as our own, have not found it necessary to include this assertion of regeneration. The statement is also omitted in the draft services of the Liturgical Commission.

⁵ Readers may be interested in the prayer which appeared in the Book of Common Prayer of the Church of Scotland "as it was sett downe at first, before the change thereof made by ye Archb. of Canterburie, and sent back to Scotland" (i.e., the draft of 1629):

"We yeeld thee heartie thanks, most mercifull father, that it hath pleased thee to receive this chyld for thy owne by adoption, and to incorporate him into thine holy congregation; And now wee humbly beseech thee, that as we have in thy name baptized him with watter, so thou wilt be graciously pleased to (*cut off*: *prob.* baptize or sanctify him with) thy holy Spirit, that so this baptism may become to him the Laiver of regeneration and hee through thy grace forsaking the devil, the world, and the flesh may serve thee all his dayes in holiness of life: etc."

⁶ Compare the prayer immediately before baptism in the liturgy mentioned in the previous note, which omits altogether the misleading idea of sanctifying water, and emphasizes both the promise of God and the role of the congregation:

"O Lord our mercifull God, who of thine infinit love hast made a covenant with us in thy deare sonne our blessed Savior Jesus Christ wherein thou hast promised both to be our God and the God and father of our children, Wee humbly entreat the good Lord to performe this thy promise towards us, Give us thy grace that wee our selves who are baptized in thy name may walk before thee as a people that have bound up a covenant with the most holy God. And as to this infant, wee pray thee for Jesus Christ's sake to receive him into the number of thy children; Wash away all his sinnes by the blood of Jesus; mortifie the power of synning sinne into him; Sanctifie him with thy holy Spirit that he may become a new creature; finally grant that the thing wee now doe on earth according to thine ordinance may be ratified in heaven as thou hast promised unto us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

⁷ Cranmer's Works, Parker Society, Vol. II, p. 99.

⁸ *Sponsors at Baptism and Confirmation*, 1952, p. 92. Dr. Bailey recognizes that "the origins of Christian sponsorship at baptism are lost in obscurity" (p. 1), but he prejudices the case somewhat by saying: "The growth of the practice of infant baptism would, in any case, necessitate adults, normally the parents, to answer for the children" (p. 2, italics mine). However, it is the reason for the *Reformers'* objection to parents as sponsors which requires explanation. We need also to remember that the responsibilities of sponsors after baptism are quite distinct from their responsibilities in the service itself. Draft canon B.22, para. 2, ignores this distinction when it says: "The Minister shall instruct the parents or guardians of an infant to be admitted to Holy Baptism that the same responsibilities rest on them as are in the service of Holy Baptism required of the godparents." The primary responsibilities required of godparents in the Prayer Book service are those of answering for the child "until he come of age to take it upon himself", and these do not devolve on the parents. The canon should make it clear that the pastoral responsibilities of instruction are what the parents must also accept.

⁹ A canon proposed by the Convocation of Canterbury in 1865 deleting the prohibition of parental sponsorship has never been given statutory authority. Draft canon B.23 proposes that "parents may be godparents for their own children provided that the child have at least one other godparent."