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Christian Initiation : The Reformation Period

G. W. BROMLEY

THE ALCUIN CLUB performs a very useful service with its historical publications. Among the more recent of these are various studies in baptism, e.g., *Baptismal Anointing* by L. L. Mitchell (No. 48) and *Christian Initiation: Baptism in the Medieval West*, by J. D. C. Fisher (No. 47). To his earlier study Canon Fisher has now added a new volume, *Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period* (No. 51), SPCK, 1970. This should be of particular interest to readers of *The Churchman*.

The work is predominantly a collection of sources and as such it has enduring value. There are three main sections, the first devoted to baptism, the second to private baptism, and the third to confirmation. To facilitate reference the texts are numbered consecutively throughout (there are fifty-one in all). A good working bibliography is appended and there are two separate indexes, the first of proper names and the second of subjects.

The documents are drawn from various Reformation groups, though intentionally restricted for the most part to the earlier half of the sixteenth century (up to and including the Second Book of Common Prayer). The Lutherans are well represented, but this is partly so, one suspects, because of their larger role in relation to the Anglican books. As regards the Books of Common Prayer the inclusion of extracts from Bucer's Censure (in English) is to be greatly commended, since few general scholars have had ready access to this much-quoted work. Along similar lines the passages from Cologne, including Hermann's famous Consultation, are another happy choice. The Reformed material is, however, disappointing. Only four extracts are given on baptism and one on confirmation or its replacement. The radical left is ignored altogether. If they did not leave much in the way of liturgies, they surely said or did something worth noting about a matter which they regarded as so important. Fisher, however, has either forgotten this or dismissed it as irrelevant. Incidentally, it is odd to find that the Zürich orders come at the very end of the baptism section when

they were in fact amongst the earliest. The first came out in the same year (1523) as Luther's Taufbüchlein, with which it is not unjustly said that a 'study of the baptismal rites of the reformers begins inevitably', (p. 3). In mitigation one might say that the arrangement is obviously not intended to be chronological.

While on the question of the Zürich orders it should be noted that Fisher has relied too slavishly on Kidd's 1911 collection here. This is what seems to lead him to the odd mistake in the flood prayer of calling Moah the eighth person when in fact, as in the Lutheran and Anglican forms, the meaning is 'even eight persons' (or 'Noah and seven others'). More significantly, however, he has been led into minor variations from the best modern texts of the Jud and first Zürich rites, e.g., spitting in the hand rather than on the ground (Jud), the godmothers naming the child rather than the godparents (Zwingli), and baptism 'in the name of' rather than very specifically 'into the name of' (Zwingli). 'Clean and open conscience' is also a mistranslation (Zwingli), and this is especially strange in view of the earlier correct 'white and spotless robe' ('open' and 'spotless' represent the same German word).

A more important issue is that the work, while undoubtedly valuable, raises a crucial methodological question. For the most part the documents selected are liturgical rather than dogmatic in character. The editor has obviously made some kind of choice here, for he gives his work the correct sub-title *Some Early Reformed Rites of Baptism and Confirmation and Other Contemporary Documents*. Nevertheless, one has to ask whether liturgical extracts, or too many of them, are in fact the best source for an understanding of Christian initiation in the Reformation period. While it is no doubt an inveterate Anglican tendency to derive doctrine from liturgy, this procedure is dubious on two counts. It is dubious historically, particularly so far as the Reformation is concerned, because the reformers themselves so obviously were trying to bring liturgy into conformity with doctrine. This goes for the Anglicans too; did not Cranmer deliberately try to make it impossible for Gardiner to find his own eucharistic teaching in the Second Book of Common Prayer? Indeed, was not the whole battle even of the 1549 book about the theological understanding that was to govern it? More recently, have not the most serious objections to many revised or experimental liturgies been, not to the changes as such, but rather to surreptitious modifications of doctrine by liturgical reconstruction?

Behind the historical failure, however, one suspects a deeper one of principle, namely, the failure to make a proper distinction between the function of liturgy on the one side and that of dogmatic formulation on the other. No one can deny, of course, that liturgy expresses doctrine, and ought to do so. Yet if there is also a place for dogmatic formulations these are designed to give a clear and precise presentation

of the positions which the liturgies reflect. For a proper statement of Christology one turns in the first instance to Nicaea or Chalcedon rather than hymns or collects or proper prefaces, however sound and beautiful and impressive these may be. The same applies no less to the Lutheran, Anglican and Reformed understanding of Christian initiation. Naturally the offices are to be consulted. But the primary sources are to be found in what are here styled 'other contemporary documents', though in the event these seem to be included mainly to throw light on the circumstances in which the rites were compiled and used.

Now it might be argued that Fisher specifically sets out to present only the rites and that he admirably fulfils his stated purpose. In this case, however, the main title seems to promise more than is in fact delivered. Moreover, the author is naturally drawn by the rites themselves into the broader question of doctrinal understanding. It is not really possible to treat liturgy in abstraction from dogma. One might suggest, then, that Fisher should either have made his intent clear by choosing a title like 'Rites of Christian Initiation: The Reformation Period' or, preferably, made a selection which brings the dogmatic and liturgical—one might also add the exegetical—sources into proper relation.

This is perhaps the point to introduce parenthetically another detailed issue which is not of great importance in itself but which does shed further light on the editorial procedure. Under the heading Private Baptism Fisher has only six items. In fact, the last two of these really belong to a separate group which is listed as such in the body of the work though not in the table of contents, namely, The Blessing of the Font. Strictly, then, only four documents (25-28) apply to private baptism, and of these the first two are Lutheran, the third is from the Consultation, and the fourth is the 1549 order. Now this is to omit altogether the strenuous Reformed objection to all private baptism, and especially to that administered by midwives. It is also to omit the fact, except for a brief note in another connection, that the English Puritans took up this objection. But even more seriously it is to ignore the one liturgical success which the Puritans scored at Hampton Court when, with the king's backing, lay baptism was eliminated from the Anglican rite of private baptism. Now this revision does, of course, fall outside the chronological limits set by the editor. But one would think that a proper presentation of the reformation position on private baptisms does demand, even liturgically, some brief reference to the Reformed teaching and at least a foot-note, if not more, on the Anglican change.

A final question which arises out of the present collection is whether Fisher has chosen a proper course in presenting his materials, or, more strictly, in presenting his own observations on the materials. Generally speaking editors of sources select their documents and

allow these to speak for themselves with very little comment apart from necessary introductory material of a more objective kind. If a need is felt to include a historical sketch of a broader type, or evaluations of the various teachings found, the right place for this is usually thought to be in an introduction, an excursus, an appendix, or perhaps extended foot-notes.

Now for the most part Fisher undoubtedly carries through his editorial task in full conformity with the usual canons. The brief prefaces to the Lutheran orders, the Strasbourg rites and the Cologne materials are factual. So, too, are the preliminary notes on the Anglican documents and the orders of Calvin and Knox. Nor does any great difficulty arise in relation to private baptism and the blessing of the font. It is in relation especially to confirmation that the situation changes dramatically and a new and unsatisfactory mode of introduction is adopted.

There are perhaps intimations of this change in the preface to the Zurich orders of baptism, where even liturgically Fisher is not in certain ground. In fact, the brief account of Zwingli's baptismal teaching is not at all adequate and seems to indicate that the author has not studied it closely or possibly not understood it. This might well explain his less than satisfactory presentation of the liturgy. Fisher also attempts a brief judgment on Zwingli's defence of infant baptism which further pinpoints the insufficiency and is also an intimation of the far worse things that are yet in store.

The decisive shift comes right at the end in the account of Calvin's teaching on confirmation. All through the confirmation section there seems to be a note of concern, but here at the end Fisher throws caution to the winds and in interspersed comments as well as the more legitimate foot-notes he enters into polemic with the reformer instead of letting him say his piece. Calvin writes 'in the most vigorous and unrestrained language', 'in particularly violent terms'. 'He did not realise on what unsure ground' one of his beliefs rested. 'The practice of the early church' (in an extended interpolation) 'does not support Calvin's claim at all.' 'Calvin's interpretation of Hebrews 6: 1f, is quite untenable' (in another extended interpolation). 'However much Calvin wished his imaginary primitive rite of confirmation to be restored, he did not restore it. . . .'

Now one may grant that Calvin is especially provocative on this issue, if not without some ground. He is also more confidently magisterial on patristic use than his evidence seems to warrant. Furthermore, Calvin's teaching does not coincide with the more moderate Anglican position, and Fisher himself obviously feels no sympathy whatever with it.

Nevertheless this is no good reason why the editor of documents should lose all patience, abandon his proper role and suddenly enter the lists as a controversialist. (The less well-established assertions of

Calvin could in any case be met by a few judicious foot-notes.) One does not study documents to engage in polemics; one studies them for information. Nor is this information on the editor's opinions; it is information on the teachings of the documents. If evaluation enters in, the student is not looking primarily for the editor's evaluation; he wants the data on which to make his own.

Confirmation is, of course, a subject that causes even more stir than baptism in the Anglican world. If there is no unified view of what it means or is, the various conflicting views seem to be held with all the more dogmatism. One rather gets the impression, then, that behind this presentation of documents there is a subdued thesis or aim, that of detaching Anglicans from Reformed teaching and practice in respect of baptism, and even more so confirmation, and relating it more firmly to the Lutheran world, or the world of Strasbourg and Cologne. Liturgically, of course, there is merit in the thesis. Doctrinally, however, the situation is not so plain, and when the Elizabethan reformers are taken into account the doctrinal affinity to the Reformed world is far more pronounced. This is a factor which does not appear in this predominantly liturgical study, and the restricted range of subject-matter as well as material helps to distort the total picture even further.

Fisher has, of course, a perfect right to his own understanding. What is not so clear is that he has a right to present the picture of the Christian initiation in such a way as to give what is perhaps a misleading impression of the classical Anglican understanding. What is not clear at all is that in the interests of his view he has a right to turn his book of sources into a polemic against the view presented in some of the sources.