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THE JUSTIFICATION OF INFANT BAPTISM

TIME after time in recent years I have found theological students somewhat perplexed about the justification of Infant Baptism, and asking themselves whether, after all, the principle and practice of Adult Baptism, or rather, as Baptists prefer to call it, Believers' Baptism, may not be more in keeping with the original meaning of the rite and with the true nature of a Christian Sacrament. In such cases I have, naturally, thought it very well worth while to discuss the matter freely and without hurry. For if the ministers of the Church are not clear enough in their own minds to give sound sacramental teaching, there is little chance of the people generally approaching Baptism with a sense of reality and at the same time escaping the popular errors with which this Sacrament is continually beset. Moreover, it is not enough to give a merely historical justification of Infant Baptism. I must, indeed, approach the subject from the point of view of Reformed doctrine, but it is not sufficient to appeal to the judgment of Reformers and Confessions. It is not sufficient even to appeal to the practice of the primitive Church. Hardly any one will claim that it can be directly and conclusively proved from New Testament evidence that Infant Baptism was regularly practised from the beginning, though it may be necessary to point out that neither can Adult or Believers' Baptism be left in possession of the field on New Testament evidence, and that, apart from such detailed evidence, Infant Baptism fits very well indeed into the New Testament picture of the Christian Church. What is needed, however, is a soundly theological justification, and, moreover, one which, while going back to first principles of the faith, as they stand out in the New Testament, can give a plain answer to the questions that perplex theological students and others to-day in this connection. If the benefits of a Sacrament are inseparably connected with the faith of the recipient, why do we baptise infants who are too young to have any faith at all? What happens spiritually when an unconscious infant is baptised? What is the difference between an infant who has been baptised and an infant who has not? These are the questions that are asked. Can we give an answer of which we need not be

ashamed, and which will enable young ministers of to-day to show their people, in spirit and in truth, that this is a real thing and a vital part of the Gospel?

I believe that it can be done to-day even more convincingly and convincingly than in many ages of the past.

I

Let us begin with the principle, which is common to all Churches, that the Sacrament of Baptism marks the entrance of the individual into the (Visible) Church of Christ. If many Reformed Churches have tended to move the font away from its traditional position near the entrance-door of the house of God to a position where it can be better seen by the worshipping congregation, this is not due to any weakening of the doctrine that Baptism is the Church's entrance-rite. That doctrine remains universal. If, then, that is accepted, it follows that the determinative question in the controversy over Infant Baptism must be: Are the children of Christians to be regarded as having a place within the Church of Christ, or are they outsiders? Are children part of the Church? Those who deny Baptism to infants must surely, if they are consistent in their thinking, answer that question with a definite negative. I do not know whether all modern Baptists would do this explicitly: the fact that many Baptist Churches have a service for the dedication of little children would seem to point in the other direction; but I do not know how they could logically avoid the negative conclusion. In the main tradition of Reformed Christianity, on the other hand, the affirmative answer is quite explicit: the Church consists of professing believers *together with their children*. It is true that this has sometimes been forgotten; otherwise how could the entrance of the Church's young people into full communion, when they attain to years of discretion and make personal profession of their faith, have come to be described as "joining the Church"? It is an unworthy phrase, and it is to be hoped that it is dying out. For these young people, who have grown up in the bosom of the Church, have been members of the Church ever since their Baptism as infants, though not "members in full communion"; and all this is quite elementary for the Churches that practise Infant Baptism.

But if the question be raised as to whether this is really sound and Christian—whether we *ought* to regard children as part of the Church of Christ—then we are driven to ask our question in what is perhaps a more concrete form: *Is there such a thing as a Christian child?* This does not mean a perfect child, or a child free from original sin; for what Christian here on earth, however mature, is perfect or free from original sin? Does “a Christian child” then mean a regenerate child, a converted child, a child who has been “born again”? There will be pretty general agreement that the kind of conversion-experience which is so common in adolescence or in adult life is not to be expected in early childhood, and that to try to force it would have harmful results. But if that is not to be expected or encouraged, what ought we to expect and to encourage in early childhood? How ought the Church to regard and to treat its children? Ought it to regard them as simply outsiders, not children of God, or Christian children, but “children of wrath”, incapable of any truly religious life, pending the time when they will be old enough to be converted to God? That ground has sometimes been taken, and its logical consequences have been frankly accepted in certain circles. One result would be the neglect of religious education, in the proper sense, on the ground that it is impossible to educate any one into the Christian life (which in a sense is very true) and that to anticipate conversion by an educational substitute is merely harmful, because it may act as an inoculation, a mild dose of religion artificially injected into children, producing a mild reaction, but enough to prevent their being soundly converted at a later stage. It is much better, on this theory, to realise clearly that these children are “children of wrath”, and (instead of trying to give them a child’s religion) to keep them waiting, teaching them only the great facts, as in a Catechism, which they will begin to understand later when they are converted. A further consequence, of course, would be that there should be no such thing as children’s worship—no children’s hymns, no prayers adapted to the minds of little children, no children’s services, no attempt to make Sunday School anything more than a *school*, or to make children worship God for themselves in their own way. All these things must indeed be repudiated if there is no such thing as the Christianity of childhood, and if the children of Christians are to pass through the years of childhood not as Christian children, but as little

pagans and outsiders, incapable of truly worshipping God. But in reply to any one who takes such ground it is surely sufficient to use our Lord's shattering question: "Have ye never read: 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings Thou hast perfected praise'?" (Matt. xxi. 16).

What, then, does God desire little children to be, during the years of their childhood? What is His will for them, in the matter of religion? Certainly not that we should try to force an adult experience upon them, for it is His will that in their early years they should really be children. It would not please Him if they were forced to grow up too quickly, for they would then be abnormal children and would grow up into the wrong sort of adults. Childhood is part of His plan for human life, just as much as is manhood or womanhood. Can it, then, be His will that children, so long as they are incapable of a mature experience, should be without any religion of their own, without any part or lot in Christ, outsiders and "children of wrath"? It seems quite impossible to maintain such an attitude if we read the Gospels, and see our Lord delighting in little children, and hear Him saying, "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven". Surely, then, it is God's will that our children should have such an experience of His grace and love as befits their stage of growth; in short, that they should be Christian children.

Therefore they should be regarded as part of the Church of Christ, the entrance to which is marked by the Sacrament of Baptism.

II

The objector may well go on to ask: Even if it is true that little children can have a genuine Christian faith, how can this be extended back to the very early days of childhood, so as to cover Infant Baptism? How can an infant of days, all unconscious of what is happening when it is baptised, be said to have the faith through which the benefits of a Sacrament come to the recipient?

I would reply by suggesting that the objection is based upon a false extreme of individualism which is as far removed from the plain facts of human life as it is from the Biblical outlook. It ignores the almost complete dependence of little children on their parents. A newborn child is the beginning of an immortal

soul, but cannot yet be regarded as an independent soul. His parents have to make all kinds of decisions for him. The decisions cannot be postponed until he is able to make them for himself, or even until he is able to *begin* to understand them, because life goes on for the soul of the child, in one track or another, and the parent who refuses to make a responsible decision is thereby making an irresponsible decision which may gravely affect the whole spiritual future of the child. Truly Christian parents will choose the Christian life for their child. Does this mean that the benefits of the Sacrament come *to the child* in response to the faith *of the parents*? Yes, indeed, that is what it means, at least at the start. The faith of the parents claims God's promise for the child, and that is as it ought to be, and is in keeping with the whole outlook of the New Testament, which has none of our false modern individualism.

It is doubtless true that most cases of Baptism mentioned in the New Testament are cases of adults. This was inevitable in the early years of the Christian mission, and the same thing happens still in the early years of any new mission-field, when most of the Christians are "first-generation Christians" who have come into the Church from outside as adults. But it would be thoroughly in keeping with the whole thought-world of the New Testament that when a man became a Christian his household as well as himself should be baptised. To become a Christian meant entering into the chosen and redeemed community, the Church of Christ, which was the new Israel, the Israel of God, inheriting the promises. As initiation into the old Israel was by the sacred rite of Circumcision, so initiation into the new Israel was by the sacred rite of Baptism. And the new Israel did not ignore the family any more than the old. Thus it would surely seem the most natural thing in the world to a Jew who became a Christian that he should have his children baptised as well as himself; just as he had had his sons circumcised in their infancy, and just as any proselyte coming into the Jewish community from outside would have his sons circumcised as well as himself, if they were so young as to be still dependent on him. I do not maintain that this in itself gives us a conclusive argument for Infant Baptism, though Calvin made so much of it. But surely such a background makes Infant Baptism look very natural in the world of the New Testament. And it is entirely in the light of that background that the *Directory of Public*

Worship drawn up by the Westminster Assembly deals with the matter. Far removed from all false individualism, the *Directory* teaches "that the promise is made to believers and their seed; and that the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the Church, have by their birth interest in the Covenant, and right to the seal of it, and to the outward privileges of the Church; . . . that children by baptism are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible Church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers . . . that they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptized."¹

III

But the objector will now come forward with what may seem to be his most formidable objection: What difference does it make to an unconscious infant when he is baptised? If Baptism were no more than a "bare sign", symbolising the fact that the children of believers have a place in the Church, or a mere service of dedication, in which the child is offered in prayer to God, this question would not arise. But if Baptism is a Sacrament, a means of grace, in which the recipient by faith receives the benefits of the Gospel, and thus has his faith strengthened, the question inevitably arises as to whether this can be in any sense true of the unconscious infant. For apart from any false individualism it remains true that it is the infant, not the parent, that must be regarded as the recipient, since it is the infant that is baptised. Yet how can the unconscious infant be the recipient? How can the infant either exercise faith or receive grace, in any spiritual sense which will exclude magical conceptions of the working of the Sacrament? And therefore what difference can it make to the child?

I would begin my answer to this question by pointing out that the Sacrament of Baptism brings the child into a new environment, the environment of the Church of Christ, which, as Calvin, following Cyprian, says, is the Mother of all who have God as their Father. In that sense the Baptism even of an infant is, as the Westminster Confession puts it, an "ingrafting into

¹ I need not dwell now on the apparent confusion in this passage between the idea that the children of believers are born within the Church and the idea that they are received into the Church by Baptism, or on the question whether this apparent contradiction is resolved by the distinction between the Visible and the Invisible Church. This does not affect my general argument.

Christ", who lives in His Church; and the child is thus given a real place in the life of the Church, whose prayers surround him from the start. At the same time it is manifestly true that the life of the parents is the most immediate point of contact between the baptised child and his new environment; and this immediate environment makes an immense difference to the child's mental and spiritual future, as any psychologist can tell us in the modern world. The objector may protest that the child might for all practical purposes have precisely the same environment of the Church and the Christian home even if there were no Sacrament of Baptism at all. But this is not really true. It is, of course, true, as the best sacramental doctrine has always maintained, that God is not bound by His Sacraments, and that He may use any kind of environment, and other means than the ordinary means of grace, for His gracious purposes. But if my argument in an earlier part of this paper was at all sound, there is a very real and important difference between the environment given to a child by a Church which really and understandingly believes in Infant Baptism and the environment given by a Church which denies this Sacrament to Infants. A Church which believingly practises Infant Baptism has an attitude and relation to its children which makes it in a peculiar sense a means and channel of grace to them; and every time the Sacrament is administered to an infant, the Church and especially the parents are brought afresh into this attitude, and thus made into "vessels meet for the Master's use" in the regeneration of children. Thus it is strictly true to say that a child is through Baptism brought into a new and supernatural environment.

But what difference does that make at the time, or for long afterwards, to the infant, who is quite incapable of anything that we could call "the faith of the recipient"? In facing that question let us ask: When does the child become capable of the beginnings of faith? If there is indeed such a thing as a Christian child, a child's religion, a genuine childish faith, at what age does this possibility begin? How far back can we go? And where shall we draw the line? It is quite impossible to give a definite answer, because there is no definite line. We dare not draw the line at all. We do know that from the child's very earliest days, even its pre-natal period, the environment matters immensely, as determining the future development of the child; and not

merely its *physical* environment in the narrow sense, but even its spiritual environment—the nervous and therefore the mental and spiritual condition of the mother. It is these things that largely determine whether the child from the very start is moulded along the lines of stress and strain, fear, disharmony, restlessness, *malaise* and fretful ill-temper, or along the lines of harmony and peace, trustfulness and good temper, faith and love. And surely a truly Christian environment, working upon the child largely through physical media, tends to produce this latter mentality in the child; and is thus a channel of the grace of God to the child from the beginning—a beginning for which we cannot draw the line anywhere.

Some time ago I heard a woman lecturer on child psychology say something which immediately seemed to me to have a bearing on sacramental doctrine. She was speaking of a hospital for motherless babies in India, and of how, for lack of a mother, many of the babies pined away and died, however well fed and tended. The nurses, of course, kept the usual rule of not handling the babies unnecessarily but letting them lie in their cots with a regular routine and the minimum of interference. But one day, she said, an Indian woman, walking about the ward and dandling a baby in her arms, said: "Why don't you let the nurses dandle the babies? A baby must have love." The lecturer went on to explain how nothing can take the place of that physical way of communicating affection, the maternal touch, the actual loving contact of the mother's or the foster-mother's hand with the baby's body, "epidermis against epidermis"; and not for any purely physical reason, but because "a baby must have love" and only through that subconscious channel can the maternal love become real to a child who has not yet any self-conscious life at all. When that happens, something truly spiritual happens, in the way that is appropriate to an "infant of days"; and spiritually it "feeds him with food convenient for him". When I heard the lecturer, I thought of Infant Baptism. If "a baby must have love", it is also true that a baby must have the grace of God in order that it may grow as a truly Christian child; and it is through the faith and love of the Church and the parents, directed upon the child in and after the Sacrament of Baptism, at first through purely physical channels, of which the sprinkling with water is the sacred type, that the grace of God reaches the scarcely conscious child. And the half-

unconscious trustfulness engendered in the child through this environment—is it not the beginning of the child's faith, as it is the only kind of faith that God would desire to see in an infant?

“ The Baby has no skies
 But Mother's eyes,
 Nor any God above
 But Mother's love.
 His angel sees the Father's face,
 But *he* the Mother's, full of grace;
 And yet the heavenly kingdom is
 Of such as this.”

Does someone protest that it is dangerous to take an analogy for the working of the grace of God from the transmission of a mother's love through the contact of her hand with the body of the child? A purely physical channel, working on the child in a quite subconscious way—must such an analogy be suspect? Surely not to those who believe in Sacraments, in which, as Calvin says, God in His wonderful providence has accommodated Himself to our capacity, precisely because we are not purely spiritual beings like the angels, but live in bodies of flesh (*Instit.*, Lib. IV, cap. I, sec. i). And if any one thinks that it is a piece of modern (or “modernist”!) sentimentalism, or on the other hand a piece of mediaeval superstition, to speak of an infant of days receiving the grace of God and responding in faith, let him turn again to Calvin. To those who asked how infants without any knowledge of good and evil could be regenerated, or how faith, which “cometh by hearing”, could come to infants incapable of hearing the Word, Calvin replied that we must not limit the power of God, who works in ways that we cannot perceive or understand, and who, to those incapable of hearing the Word, can give His grace otherwise (*Instit.*, Lib. IV, cap. XVI, secs. xvii–xix). And if modern psychology gives us a clue beyond what Calvin could have in the sixteenth century, we may be thankful for that.

IV

There is something yet to be added, in our justification of Infant Baptism. Let me introduce it with these words from the Westminster Confession: “The efficacy of Baptism is not

tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited and conferred by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongeth unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time" (*Confession of Faith*, xxvii. 6). The latter part of the sentence, with choice delicacy of phrase, covers and confirms what I have just been saying. But the first clause adds something very important on which I have not yet touched. The point is that the Baptism of an infant may be to him a means of grace not merely at that moment but all his life long, and the faith which apprehends the benefits of the Gospel through that Sacrament includes the mature faith of the adult looking back long afterwards, with understanding of what his Baptism meant. This again is entirely in line with the original Reformed conception of the Sacraments and of this particular sacrament. Calvin maintains that infants are baptised into *future* repentance and faith, the seeds of which are implanted in their hearts by the Holy Spirit; and that, according to New Testament Teaching, the "thing signified" need not *precede* the "sign", but may come after. All this is, of course, in line with the principle laid down in the *Westminster Directory* of 1645, and notably emphasised again in our own time, that the adult Christian should look back to his Baptism with understanding, and that by faith he should use it as a means of grace. It may be that this is more forgotten than remembered in many churches; but in our own time we are again beginning to teach very plainly that the young lad who is being prepared for "First Communion" should look back to the vows made for him when he was baptised, and deeply realise the meaning of what was done, because he is now about to "confirm the covenant of his baptism", apprehending its promise with adult faith. Thus it is profoundly true that the efficacy of Infant Baptism "is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered", but may be potent throughout a man's life. If all this could become real throughout the Church, as it ought to be, then it would be truer than ever that the principle and practice of Infant Baptism affect the whole life of a Church and give it a sound and Christian attitude to its children, to its task of nurture and education, to the family, to its individuals, and to the whole life of the community. And therefore it is of the very greatest importance,

as I said at the beginning, that the Churches which practise Infant Baptism should thoroughly understand what they are doing, and that sound sacramental teaching on the matter should reach the minds of all its members. Perhaps this short article may contribute a trifle towards that end.

D. M. BAILLIE.

St. Andrews.