

I

INTRODUCTION

THE centrality of baptism in the life and thought of the Christian Church is a matter which few would wish to dispute. F. J. Foakes-Jackson could well write, 'it is an unquestionable fact that from the very first baptism was considered absolutely necessary for every person who entered the Christian Community'.¹ Yet, at the same time, it is also an unquestionable fact that this sacrament has been for many years a storm centre of theological controversy and, indeed, remains so to this day. There can be little doubt that one of the factors which has produced this unfortunate situation has been the desire of Christians of various traditions to prove that their view of baptism is the one which, *par excellence*, is true to the New Testament. Now it goes without saying that any approach to the study of Christian doctrine in its formative biblical matrix should be guided by honest exegesis of the biblical text. Such a statement may well appear axiomatic, yet it has been one of the regrettable features of Church history that the biblical text has very often been subjected to interpretations which were largely dependent upon emotional judgments and partisan loyalties. Indeed, it has to be conceded that it is almost an impossibility for us to come to the study of the New Testament with a genuinely open mind for our thoughts are already conditioned by our own traditions and backgrounds as well as nearly two thousand years of biblical interpretation. We tend, all too often, to come to the study of the data of the New Testament with preconceived ideas fitting the Biblical record to the particular theory or concept which we then claim is derived from it.

Erroneous exegesis of this nature is most commonly to be met in the fields of eschatology and ecclesiology, and it is into this latter category that we must place the doctrine of the sacraments, and baptism in particular. As Clark has remarked, 'it is indeed strange that the practice of enunciating a broad and general definition of a "sacrament" and from it "reading off" a Christian doctrine of the sacraments should for so long have passed virtually unchallenged'.² On the other hand, as we have already pointed out, it will prove no easy task to undertake a study of baptism purely from the biblical material, for with the best will in the world the bias of the writer will inevitably show through his arguments from time to time. This, however, is the task which we have set ourselves; we shall attempt to elucidate the data provided by the New Testament and endeavour to see what conclusions may be drawn from them. Thus, unlike the majority of studies in baptism, we are deliberately limiting ourselves to one period only of the Church's history, namely the Apostolic Age, although from time to time we shall make reference to the writings of the sub-apostolic Fathers. In confining our attention to the New Testament we are endeavouring to understand what baptism meant to the original first-century readers of these writings. This will necessitate that we pay some attention to the historical backgrounds and antecedents of Christian baptism. It is important to remember that for the Bible to speak meaningfully to us in our own situation we must first attempt to discover and to understand how it spoke to those to whom it was originally written.

Having outlined the general scope of our study we must now turn our attention to a brief and general consideration of the inter-relationships of the sacraments. It will be as well, at this juncture, to remind ourselves that there is no value in defining a sacrament according to our own theological or ecclesiastical presuppositions, and accordingly we shall not make any attempt to define the term which will, in fact, be used simply as descriptive without any theological or other connotation, although at a later stage of the discussion some definition in theological terms may be attempted. Throughout this study then the term 'sacrament' will simply denote the New Testament ordinances of

baptism and the Lord's Supper, together with the related Old Testament rites of circumcision and the Passover. We now turn to a preliminary study in which it is our task to see baptism in relation to the sacraments in general and to the covenant of grace.

The Covenant of Grace

From an examination of the relevant passages in the New Testament it would seem that the writers viewed the new covenant established in and through Jesus Christ as completely abrogating that old covenant which related specifically to the national privileges of Israel. This does not mean that God has cast away His people, far from it,³ but it does mean that in Christ a new worshipping community has been established. In the setting up of this New Israel the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant, and the promises to his descendants, have been extended to include all mankind. From the advent of the Christ onwards the kingdom of God could no longer be looked upon as the prerogative of an isolated racial group, if indeed it ever could have been really seen in such a light. It had been given to those who would produce its fruit, whether Jew or Gentile. Thus when dealing with the Roman centurion who had demonstrated such a remarkable faith, the Lord could say,

'many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven. But the children of the kingdom shall be cast out into outer darkness' (Matt. 8.11, 12. cf. also 21.43).

It is not our purpose to pursue a detailed comparison between the old and new covenants, but we do need to establish the general principles.

In the first place it must be said that the coming of Christ effected something new; the new covenant which He established was something new and radical; as Barclay has said, 'with the coming of Jesus Christ something totally new has happened. Into life there has come something which did not exist before,

and which without Him could not exist; that something is not something which emerged from the human situation; it is something which has entered life from outside; from God'.⁴ Yet, at the same time, we cannot ignore the fact that there exists between old and new a real sense of continuity: the new cannot be divorced from the old. There is an apparent paradox here which is resolved in the person of Christ. All that the old contained is fulfilled in Him and this fulfilment gives birth to the new.

The new covenant in Christ was foretold by the prophets who only too well recognised the limitations of the old (see Jer. 31.31-34, and cf. Heb. 9.8-13; 10.11-18, etc.). They looked forward to that better covenant in which men's hearts would be changed and in which they would be able to worship God acceptably. They looked forward to that 'inward circumcision of the heart' which could be effected only through a spiritual renewal, through the gift of the Spirit of God. Furthermore, the old itself contained the seed of the new, for it was Christ Himself who was the ultimate fulfilment of the covenant that God made with Abraham and the means whereby its blessings were extended to all men (Gal. 3.14). Abraham was declared to be the father of the faithful (cf. Rom. 4.11, 12; Gal. 3.7, 29) and the New Testament makes it very clear that this fatherhood was not limited to his physical descendants. He was 'not only the father of his believing children, who were circumcised, but of all, in every nation, who walk in the steps of his faith. Believing Gentiles are said to be grafted, contrary to nature, into a good olive tree (Rom. 11.24); and to be Abraham's seed (Gal. 3.29)'.⁵ The Gentile thus stands, in Christ, within this original covenant of grace, and in this connexion it is important to note that both the Abrahamic and new covenants were effected through the same Mediator (Acts 4.12; 10.43; 15.10, 11; Gal. 3.16, etc.), and in both cases the ground of entry was the same, namely, that of faith.

The absolute necessity of faith in respect of the old covenant could lead Paul to say,

'For not all descendants of Israel are truly Israel, nor because they are Abraham's offspring are they all his true children' (Rom. 9.7 NEB).

Our Lord Himself also confirmed this viewpoint in His own denial of the validity of the claim of the unbelieving Jews by whom He was confronted to be the seed of Abraham (John 8.39, cf. also Luke 3.8). Furthermore, we should note that at 1 Corinthians 10.1-4 Paul ascribes to the community of the old covenant the very same conditions which are essential for the sacraments of the new. The newly released people of Israel marked the beginning of their new national life in an act of baptism, in their wanderings in the desert they shared in Christ through the spiritual food and drink of which they all partook, and which, says Paul, is to be considered essentially comparable to the Christian eucharist.

Much of the confusion which has centred around this whole subject has arisen out of a failure to distinguish between the covenant made with Abraham, which was a covenant of grace and based on faith, and the purely national covenant made with the people at Sinai, a covenant centred in the Law and dependent upon the condition of the personal obedience of the people. In point of fact this legal covenant was never an integral part of the primary purpose of God; it was incidental, its purpose was subordinate to the redemptive plan inherent in the Abrahamic covenant. Thus Paul can say that not only was the legal covenant of Sinai a temporary measure awaiting the fulfilment of the promise in Christ (Gal. 3.19), but moreover that it was an 'intrusion'⁶ into the main stream of God's purposes (Rom. 5.20). The covenant of grace, made initially with Abraham and fulfilled in Christ, is an eternal covenant, whereas, on the other hand, that of Sinai was extraneous, exceptional and temporary. It is this purely legal covenant which has been totally abrogated by Christ, and in its place stands the covenant which is supra-national, faith-centred and of grace, the completion of those things for which the earlier covenant with Abraham stood. Thus, the continuity which exists between these two is a continuity of completion. Now in Christ we see the plan revealed. Christ is the substance, the reality of the covenant of promise to Abraham, which now becomes the covenant of fulfilment in the new covenant in Christ.

The Abrahamic covenant of grace continues, but in a far

deeper and richer sense. In Christ, the 'one Seed' to whom the promise pertained and with whom the covenant was made, a new wealth of blessing, far beyond anything that Abraham could have envisaged, has been opened to all who stand within this new covenant. It is pertinent to notice here that wherever the covenant in Christ is denominated 'new' in the New Testament it stands in contrast, not with the Abrahamic covenant, but with that made at Sinai (cf. 2 Cor. 3.6; Gal. 4.24ff.; Heb. 9.15; etc.). There is thus only the one spiritual covenant, but, as it were, in two parts, for Abraham a covenant of promise, for us a covenant of fulfilment, but in both aspects centred in Christ. Thus the faithful of the old (Abrahamic) covenant are conjoined with us of the new to form one covenant community, the Church of God, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it,

'with us in mind God had made some better provision, so that only in company with us should they reach perfection' (Heb. 11.40).

The covenant with Abraham and the new covenant sealed in the blood of Christ stand as two aspects of the one redemptive covenant of grace, that one-sided disposition of grace in which God has acted toward rebellious man.⁷

The Ordinances of the Old and New Eras

Notwithstanding this very real sense of continuity which exists between the old and the new, the new community of the Christian Church did not use the ordinances of the old order. There was naturally an interim period before the young Church gained full self-consciousness. In this period, when both from the inside and the outside it would be viewed as little more than a new sect within the fold of Judaism, Jewish Christians continued with the old rites. At the same time, however, we should note that as early as AD 48 (the probable date of Galatians) Paul was insisting on the rejection of circumcision, reminding his readers that they had been baptised into Christ. Circumcision and the Passover were indissolubly linked with the old Israel

and its national structure. The new covenant had been established in the death of a new Paschal Lamb, so that Paul could write, 'our Passover, the Messiah, has been sacrificed for us' (1 Cor. 5.7). This was a death which effected release, not from the mere despotism of an earthly ruler, but from the thralldom of the cosmic powers of evil (Eph. 2.1-3), a release from the closed circle of sin and death, bringing us into the new world, the new covenant, the new community, the kingdom of God.⁸ In this new community circumcision of the flesh is replaced by a spiritual circumcision which is demonstrated in the new sacrament of baptism, yet, and it is important to notice this, both are the seal of a righteousness which is by faith (Rom. 4.11; Col. 2.11). We may digress here a moment and note that in the context of Romans chapter 4 the sign of circumcision, that sign which in the Jewish mind marked Israel as the distinct and separate people of God, pointed beyond Israel to the ultimate inclusion of the Gentiles within the covenant community. Circumcision was 'nothing more than a ratification of Abraham's faith. Faith was the real motive power; and as it is applied to the present condition of things Abraham's faith in the promise has its counterpart in the Christian's faith in the fulfilment of the promise (i.e. in Christ). Thus a new division was made. The true descendants of Abraham were not so much those who imitated his circumcision (i.e. all Jews whether believing or not), but those who imitated his faith (i.e. believing Jews and believing Gentiles)'.⁹

It is thus possible to say that both circumcision and the Passover pointed forward as types of the new covenant. They demonstrated the entry into, and the continuity of the covenant life, both in respect of the individual and of the community as a whole. In their place stand baptism and the Lord's Supper. As circumcision demonstrated that entry had been made into the blessings and the community of the Abrahamic covenant, so baptism is the rite of entry into the new covenant and the community of that covenant. Consequently it is not to be considered that baptism can ever be a purely personal act, as some erroneously imagine, for it relates to the corporate life of the new community and it cannot be divorced from it. While, therefore,

it is true that isolated cases of individual baptisms occur in the New Testament (the case of the Ethiopian eunuch immediately springs to mind), it is also true that the theology of the New Testament consistently points to baptism as the seal of entry into the new redeemed community. This is a matter which will occupy us at a later stage of the discussion. Similarly, just as the Passover demonstrated the continuing life of the covenant in the experience of the people, especially in the memory of the mighty act of the deliverance from Egypt, so also the Lord's Supper is to be seen as the demonstration of the continuance of the covenant life in the Church, as the memorial of the greatest of the mighty acts of a saving God in the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

The Ordinances as Proclamation

An examination of the New Testament soon reveals that the Christian ordinances are not simply signs relating to the covenant of grace. Rather the evidence of the apostolic teaching suggests that they were primarily a proclamation, dramatic in form, of those saving events which lay at the heart of the covenant. Thus we may say that for the early Church the ordinances were not considered primarily as sacramental observances which were 'means of grace', although without question that aspect was present especially in the developed ideas of Paul, but rather their primary significance lay in their demonstration of the historical action of God in the redemptive work of Christ. Once again we may note the point of contact between the old and the new in so far as the ordinances of the old covenant related to a similar work of God in relation to Israel. We cannot isolate the ordinances from their historical context; they are actions which demonstrate real historical events, or rather, they demonstrate the one event, the 'unitary unique event, the "Christ-event"'.¹⁰ In so doing they proclaim, in dramatic form, the truth of the Gospel. Thus at 1 Cor. 11.26 Paul can say that in the Lord's Supper 'you proclaim the Lord's death'. This verb 'proclaim' (*katangellō*) is the common word for preaching the saving events of the work of Christ (cf. Acts

4.2; 13.5; 1 Cor. 9.14; Col. 1.28; etc.). For this reason there is an indissoluble union between the Word and the sacraments, between the Word preached and the Word acted, both of which present to the world that Word who is the fulness of God's self-disclosure.¹¹

We can never escape from the evidence that the Christianity of the New Testament was firmly grounded in the Jewish sense of *Heilsgeschichte*, of salvation- or saving-history. To those of the first century history was the arena in which God acted, and the message which the apostles proclaimed was one which was not only firmly grounded in the events of the historical revelation of God in Christ, but was consistently related to them, for the apostles had been witnesses of these things, these real events which made up the 'one event', the climax of salvation-history. In the same way both baptism and the Lord's Supper, as integral parts of this apostolic missionary preaching, were not merely grounded in this historical event, not merely related to it, but rather they stood as its proclamatory signs, announcing the reality of the good news of Jesus Christ as it was related to both the individual and corporate aspects of the life of the new community. As part of the Gospel proclamation the ordinances are founded in, dependent on, and, indeed, derive their whole meaning from the work of God in Christ. As J. S. Whale has put it, the 'heart of the sacraments is divine Action not divine Substance'.¹²

With these preliminary observations in mind we must now turn to a discussion of baptism in more detail. As we have already indicated we shall attempt to consider this ordinance in the light of its historical background, we shall endeavour to discover what the New Testament has to teach with regard to the actual rite itself and its mode of administration, and then we shall turn to examine the spiritual significance which underlies the performance of this simple act. The right apprehension of its spiritual meaning will ultimately depend upon a true orientation of the sacrament to the Christology, ecclesiology and eschatology of the New Testament, for baptism, and for that matter the Lord's Supper also, cannot be treated in isolation, but only in their relation to the full life of the Church of God.

At this point we need also to sound a word of caution. It is, in spite of the many efforts which have been made through the long history of the Church, a manifest impossibility to project ourselves back into the *milieu* of the first century. In the words of Warren Carr, we are faced with the 'assured impossibility of recapturing the New Testament Church without abolishing the form and institution of the Church as it now is'.¹³ Yet having said this it is also true that the New Testament must remain our guide and basic authority as we seek to align our Church practice and its theological basis.

NOTES

1. F. J. Foakes-Jackson, *The History of the Christian Church to AD 461*, (1914) p. 230.
2. N. Clark, *An Approach to the Theology of the Sacraments*, (1956) p. 71.
3. For a valuable discussion of this problem see H. L. Ellison, *The Mystery of Israel*, (1966).
4. W. Barclay, *Many Witnesses, One Lord*, (1963) p. 110.
5. R. Haldane, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (1958 edn.) p. 175. In the same vein E. Earle Ellis can write, 'As the imagery of the olive tree in Romans 11 shows, for Paul there is only one Israel into which the Gentiles are ingrafted'. (*Paul's Use of the Old Testament*, (1957) p. 137.)
6. The verb *pareiserchomai* translated simply by 'enter' in the AV is more literally rendered 'enter in alongside'. The idea contained in the verb is brought out by translating it as 'intrude' or 'slip in'. Paul is thus saying of the Law that it does not, nor indeed can it, play a decisive part in the plan of God. Its function was to act as a subsidiary factor revealing the extent of man's sin. It was never intended to act as a means of justification, which both in Old and New Testaments is always on the ground of faith. In regard to the inter-relationships of these covenants it cannot be over-emphasised that 'the Abrahamic Covenant stands in continuity with the New Covenant (*kainē diathēkē*); the *palaiā diathēkē* (Old Covenant) of Sinai stands in contrast' (E. Earle Ellis, *op. cit.* p. 130).
7. For a fuller discussion of this whole subject see the monograph of J. Murray, *The Covenant of Grace*, (1954). See also R. Newton Flew, *Jesus and His Church*, (1938) pp. 100ff. E. Earle Ellis, *op. cit.* pp. 136ff., and the comments of the present writer in *Among the Prophets*, (1967) pp. 116ff.
8. There is evidence in the rabbinic commentaries on Exodus that the death of the paschal lamb was thought, even in the old covenant, to have atoning significance. As the present writer has remarked in another context, 'there seem to be no adequate grounds for rejecting the idea that in fact the whole Passover ritual is part of that dominant biblical theme, the idea of redemption through blood' ('Passover and Eucharist

in the Fourth Gospel', *SyTh.* (1967) 20. 3 (Sept.), pp. 329ff.). See further H. J. Schoeps, *Paul, The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History*, (ET 1961) pp. 141-149, and W. D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, (1955²) pp. 102ff.

9. W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *Romans (ICC)*, (1902) p. 107.
10. The phrase is that of E. Stauffer (*New Testament Theology*, (ET 1955) p. 157).
11. This idea is well developed by K. Barth, (*Prayer and Preaching*, (ET 1964) pp. 74-79).
12. J. S. Whale, *Christian Doctrine*, (1957 edn.) p. 157.
13. W. Carr, *Baptism: Conscience and Clue for the Church*, (1964) p. 176.