

### III

## BAPTISM—THE NEW TESTAMENT RITE

OUR examination of the various forms of pre-Christian baptism has revealed the way in which they made the preparation for the Christian rite, and, at the same time, it also demonstrates that we cannot treat New Testament baptism as an isolated phenomenon. At this stage in our study we must turn our attention to the information which we can derive from the New Testament with respect to the actual practice of this rite in apostolic times. Having briefly discussed the matter of administration, without which a study of baptism in the New Testament would be incomplete, we will be able to move on to the much more important matter of the underlying theology of this ordinance.

It soon becomes evident that, in point of fact, the pages of the New Testament provide us with very little information, and we find no definite or explicit teaching concerning the actual mode of baptism. This accords with the general trend of the New Testament to ignore matters of practice, since, quite apart from other reasons, what was generally known to all did not require to be written down. This is a fact which almost certainly applies to other areas of the New Testament where a silence upon various issues can be, for us, somewhat tantalising (cf. the 'you know' of 2 Thess. 2.6).<sup>1</sup> Beyond this, however, there is a more important reason for the omission of practical details from the New Testament. In a day when outward forms are often considered of greater importance than spiritual vitality, we will do well to note that the consistent emphasis of the New

Testament is upon inner spiritual meanings and not upon outward rites. There is another possible reason for the paucity of data relating to sacramental practice, namely, that the early Church tended to follow the Jewish example of not setting down in writing detailed accounts of the various ordinances of worship. These were regarded, and in some senses one would judge rightly so, as 'holy things reserved for the holy', and in adopting this practice the early Christians also believed that they were obeying the command of the Lord Himself, who had said, 'Do not throw your pearls in front of swine' (Matt. 7.6). Letters and documents could be intercepted and lost, and as a result those matters regarded as sacred could be exposed to the public view, the gaze of the ungodly. Thus Basil could write, 'the apostles and fathers who from the beginning gave prescription concerning the Church guarded the dignity of the mysteries in secrecy and silence'.<sup>2</sup> One must be very careful of pressing this too far, but, nevertheless, it does seem that there was a genuine reluctance on the part of the early Christians to set down the actual modes of observance of the sacraments, a reluctance which was partly responsible for the levelling of such grave charges against the Church as incest and cannibalism by their pagan contemporaries.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of this paucity of information it is possible, nonetheless, to arrive at certain conclusions with regard to apostolic practice, and it is to the derivation of these conclusions from the data with which the New Testament provides us that we must now turn our attention. We shall endeavour to discover what is said concerning the recipients of baptism in those early days; concerning what instruction was given to baptismal candidates; and concerning the formula and mode of baptism itself.

### **The Recipients of Baptism**

The picture which emerges from the Acts of the Apostles is that of a zealous missionary-minded Church, confronting the hostile world in which the Christians found themselves with the message concerning Jesus of Nazareth, a man whom they

claimed was the Anointed of God. His coming had brought a crisis into the world, a crisis which all men must recognise and in recognising must reach decision. The apostolic proclamation of the Gospel concluded with the threefold imperative; with that command which arose automatically out of the presentation of the good news with which they confronted their contemporaries. In the first place there was the summons to repent, to make that change in the whole direction and tenor of life which would bring about a reorientation towards God. Then there came the summons to a total life commitment to the 'man of God's choosing', Jesus, whom God had made both Lord and Messiah. Finally there came the summons to be baptised, to show publicly the reality of the new convert's membership of the new Messianic community, established in and through Jesus Christ, and, at the same time, demonstrating that the person had been sealed into this community through the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2.37, 38, 41; 8.12, 13, 35, 36; 10.44; 11.14, 15, etc.). This is the sequence of events which characterised the whole of the early Church's mission as recorded in the Acts, and there is no evidence that any were baptised without first demonstrating both repentance and faith. We may conclude from the available evidence, and we are on firm ground in so doing, that throughout the apostolic period the two essential prerequisites of baptism were repentance and faith, the emphasis is that 'they that gladly received his word were baptised' (Acts 2.41). Gregory Dix has well pointed out<sup>4</sup> that initiation into the Church throughout the New Testament period is thought of solely in terms of a conscious response to the Gospel; the implications of this will emerge later.

Men thus heard the message, they were brought face to face with the crisis and its inherent challenge, and they committed themselves to God in Christ, confessing their new faith and their new found remission of sins in the symbolic act of baptism. All the available evidence of the New Testament points to the fact that without faith baptism is invalid, for without the 'word of faith' of the proclamation itself baptism degenerates into little more than a magical rite. Baptism thus marked the beginning of the new life within the Christian community, and

in this respect it is significant to note that the primary act of faith and committal together with the confession of that act in baptism are never treated in the New Testament as separable events. Throughout this early period baptism followed directly upon the initial confession of faith, as F. F. Bruce has written, 'faith in Christ and baptism were, indeed, not so much two distinct experiences as parts of one whole; faith in Christ was an essential element in baptism, for without it the application of water, even accompanied by the appropriate words, would not have been baptism'.<sup>5</sup> This is clearly demonstrated in the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch, even without the later interpolation (Acts 8.35-38), and the witness of Acts 2.37-42 is also suggestive of the unity of faith and baptism in a virtually single event at this early stage.

One of the implications which arises out of this discussion is that it was not the practice of the early Church to baptise infants, since repentance and faith were considered as preceding and not following baptism. The present writer remains convinced that such was indeed the practice of the New Testament Church, and that infant baptism was a later arising rite, and one which, in Gregory Dix's words, must always be viewed as an 'abnormality, wholly incomplete by itself'.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand it must be conceded that there is more than one side to the question. Although we have no wish to be drawn into a controversy which has, over the years, been characterised by a lack of Christian charity and an overabundance of bitterness, nonetheless, in a study of this nature, some discussion of Paedo-baptism is indicated. The matter will accordingly occupy us in a later chapter together with the related problem of household baptism. At this point we must emphasise that the New Testament consistently places the emphasis upon the central meaning of baptism, and the various peripheral issues are virtually ignored. It is to these central issues that we should direct our attention, and as we do so other matters will tend to fall into their rightful place. It is, in fact, as G. W. Bromiley has remarked, 'unfortunate that in post-Reformation theology the disruptive and seemingly interminable Paedo-baptist controversies have blocked the way to advance along these more

interesting lines',<sup>7</sup> namely of baptismal theology, which, we might add, are also more scriptural lines. Nonetheless, we may say that 'it seems clear that the New Testament theology of baptism, apart from any other consideration, implies "re-sponsible" baptism'.<sup>8</sup>

We may thus conclude this section by saying that the evidence of the New Testament is overwhelmingly in favour of the view that the recipients of baptism in the early Church were those who had been brought face to face with the crisis of the Gospel and had made their own response to it in faith. Such a situation, we believe, was also wholly consistent with what we shall seek to show was the apostolic doctrine of baptism. Throughout the New Testament the references to baptism 'assume that its recipients are adults, and that the dispositions required in them are those of conscious and deliberate renunciation of sin and idols, and of personal faith and allegiance to Christ'.<sup>9</sup>

### **Pre-Baptismal Instruction**

At the very beginning of the Church's mission the new converts, who were largely Jews and proselytes, did not receive a distinct course of pre-baptismal instruction. It was not long, however, before it came to be recognised that such instruction was both necessary and desirable, especially for those who had been brought into the Church from Gentile paganism. There are strands of evidence in the pages of the New Testament for such pre-baptismal catechising, even though, as we have already noted, in the earliest phase conversion and baptism formed virtually a unitary experience. At his baptism the convert would make a confession of his faith in the words which he had been taught. The earliest baptismal confession was probably the simple statement, 'Jesus is Lord' (cf. Rom. 10.9, 10, etc.), a statement which in the early days was considered sufficient, and indeed, is one with far-reaching implications. However, even in the apostolic era, there seems to be evidence for the elaboration of such simple statements into something approaching a more definite credal formula. The formation of such creeds, it is clear, was naturally controlled to some extent

by the apologetic needs of the Church in different places, but, at the same time, they were also statements of the universal faith held by all Christians everywhere.

The New Testament contains many examples of such credal affirmations, nearly all of which possess a rudimentary rhythm and may often be set out in stanzas. It is well known that verse-form is a standard aid to the memory and in addition it was a common practice in the early Church to incorporate doctrinal statements into the hymns, which from the beginning formed a basic element of Christian worship. Thus Stauffer notes, 'many confessions were hymn-like, and many hymns were creed-like',<sup>10</sup> and it is not always easy or even possible to be certain which is which. Among the New Testament examples which may be adduced, the 'Faithful Sayings' of the Pastoral Epistles stand out together with such passages as 1 Timothy 3.16, and 1 Peter 3.18-22 which are obvious confessional statements, and credal passages such as 1 Corinthians 15.3-5 and Philippians 2.6-11 to note but two.<sup>11</sup> In this connexion it is worth noting that even the apostolic missionary preaching, the *kerygma*, was of a fixed form which may be recovered from the Acts and the epistles, a discovery which we owe to the researches of C. H. Dodd.<sup>12</sup> The new convert having committed such material to memory would be expected to reproduce it when making his confession of faith at his baptism.

The earliest recorded confession of this nature is that of the interpolation of Acts 8.37, in which the confession was simply one of Christ's deity. Such statements were eventually amplified into definite triadic formulae, and ultimately into full credal affirmations. At all stages in the development of the early Church, however, baptism was the outstanding occasion on which such confessions of faith were made. Indeed, form-critical analysis has made it abundantly clear that the occasion of baptism forms the primary source and the basic setting for the New Testament confessional formulae. In this regard we may note especially the use of what may well have been expressions taken from a primitive baptismal liturgy at 1 Corinthians 6.11 and Hebrews 6.4, and the probable use of baptismal hymns at Romans 8.29f. and Ephesians 5.14. It is also worth

noting that 1 Peter 1.3 to 4.11 has been viewed, with some justification, as consisting of an Easter baptismal liturgy. Such confessions naturally involved not only 'the answer of a good conscience' (1 Pet. 3.21),<sup>13</sup> but also the affirmation of belief rooted in the foundation *credo*, 'Jesus is Lord'.

Apart from such credal teaching relating to the basic issues of the faith, there also seems to have been instruction in other matters. The reference to such elementary Christian teaching at Hebrews 6.1, 2, where 'washings' (*baptismōn*) almost certainly includes baptism proper as the fulfilment in the new order of the old Levitical washings, indicates that this teaching was developed along three main lines. There was first of all a basic instruction in Christian ethics, the major concern of the apostolic *didache*, then there was instruction in the sacraments themselves, and finally there was teaching concerning eschatology (cf. also 1 Cor. 11.2, 16; Heb. 5.12, etc.). This teaching would also have been of a catechetical nature. Daube is probably right when he considers this mode of instruction as one of the most important contributions of Judaism to early Christianity,<sup>14</sup> since, as Stauffer remarks, catechismal formulae 'as an aid to memory were indispensable'.<sup>15</sup>

This same approach is to be found in the immediate post-apostolic writings. For example the *Didache* (known also as *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*) provided a course of moral and ethical exhortation based on the 'Two Ways' — the way of life and the way of death — and which followed the same three lines as the New Testament teaching, namely, ethics, the sacraments, and the last things. It is likely that the teaching of the 'Two Ways' was taken over essentially from the instructions relating to Jewish proselyte baptism, but in its new Christian context the teaching is extended to include the confession of sins, and the renunciation of the old life, on the one hand, and the confession of Jesus as Lord, together with the demands of a new loyalty and allegiance, on the other. As we hope to show later, these are things which are symbolised in the baptismal act.<sup>16</sup> Such courses of instruction, together with confessional and credal statements, formed the basis of the teaching of the new convert before his baptism. Indeed it seems possible that the

creed had its fixed place within the liturgy of the Church within New Testament times, if not from the very beginning.<sup>17</sup>

The actual period of instruction for the baptismal candidate seems to have varied considerably, no doubt according to local conditions and prevailing circumstances. In the very earliest phase baptism followed directly on conversion but as time went on the two became separated by varying intervals. In some cases it was only for a matter of three months,<sup>18</sup> but by the time we reach the third century it had become necessary for a longer probationary period, and Hippolytus writes, 'let a catechumen be instructed for three years'.<sup>19</sup> These references, however, belong to a more developed period of the Christian Faith than that which we are considering. Indeed, by this time, there was a marked and obvious departure from the simplicity which was such a feature of the Church of the New Testament. There can be little doubt, however, that by the end of the first century, and most probably for some considerable time before, baptism had become the major occasion for the giving of a careful instruction in the Christian Faith. This fact, together with the common association of the gift of the Holy Spirit with baptism, led to the baptismal candidate being described as 'enlightened', a term perhaps originally borrowed from the mystery religions.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Baptismal Formula**

The well-known words of the Matthean formula (Matt. 28.19) command baptism into the threefold name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, but when we turn to consider the actual practice of the early Church we find no evidence in either the Acts or the epistles that such a trinitarian formula was ever used. Some critics have suggested that this is simply because such formulae belong to a later period of the Church's history. It is consequently alleged that the closing verses of Matthew's gospel cannot be considered as a genuine saying of Jesus. The words 'into the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' are in fact an anachronism and could not belong to such an early stage of the Church's development before the doctrine of the Trinity had been formulated. It is thus commonly

asserted that these words cannot be earlier than the second century, and further evidence for this viewpoint is found in the fact that when Eusebius quotes this passage he frequently omits the trinitarian statement altogether or else uses phraseology which differs from the words of the Gospel as we have them. On the other hand it should be noted that the trinitarian formula is to be found in all the extant manuscripts, a circumstance which would be unlikely in the event of these words being a later addition.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, it should also be noted that from the very beginning of the Church's mission a triadic scheme was inherent in the proclamation even though it was not yet a formulated doctrine, nor indeed would be for many years to come.<sup>22</sup>

It is, however, interesting to note that the early Church, in point of fact, did not pay any great regard to these words as a *basis* of baptism. As Davies has remarked, 'the early Fathers rested the institution of baptism not so much on the logion at the end of Matthew as upon the baptism of Christ Himself'.<sup>23</sup> The earliest evidence for the use of the Matthean words as a baptismal formula is to be found in the *Didache*, a Jewish-Christian document written about AD 135 or earlier and to which reference has already been made. The instruction is given, 'Baptise in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living (i.e. running) water'.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, however, we need to remember that 'the community must have been aware that in baptising it was fulfilling the intention of the Lord. Quite irrespective of the ceaseless critical objections to Matthew 28.18-20 and Mark 16.16, we may conclude from the very existence and significance of the apostolate that there was knowledge of a missionary command, or many such commands, of the risen Lord, and that in accordance with the new situation this command was understood as a command to baptise'.<sup>25</sup> It would seem, however, that at Matthew 28.16 our Lord was not primarily concerned with providing instruction about the actual words of a baptismal service. Indeed this is most unlikely. Rather it would appear that He was underlining the nature of this new Christian baptism as distinct from all other baptisms of the time. Christian baptism was into a unique threefold relationship to God, a matter that we shall return to later.

Apart from these words at the close of Matthew's Gospel there is little evidence in the New Testament for a genuine baptismal formula, although there can be little doubt, as we have already seen, that the act of baptism was a moment of confession. The interpolated verse at Acts 8.37 clearly mirrors the practice of the early Church and is suggestive that there was a distinctive pattern in the rite of baptism. The earliest confession was 'Jesus is Lord', but these were words which formed the response of the candidate in his baptism rather than being an actual formula of baptism. The use of *rhēma* (the 'saying', not as AV the 'word') at Ephesians 5.26 in relation to the washing of baptism is also suggestive that there was a definite stereotyped word-pattern in the rite of baptism, but opinion is divided as to whether the reference is to a pattern of confession, a statement of a simple creed, or to an actual baptismal formula.<sup>26</sup> Generally speaking throughout the New Testament baptism is spoken of as being 'into Christ' (*eis Christon*) (Gal. 3.27, etc.), thus indicating the essential union established in baptism between the believer and Christ, and also the believer's incorporation into the Body of Christ. The two aspects are somewhat difficult to separate, since in some ways they are interdependent, but in the context of Romans 6 it is the thought of union which is uppermost, whereas the predominant thought in Galatians 3 is that of incorporation into the Church.<sup>27</sup> As F. F. Bruce has written, 'the person baptised *eis to onoma tou kuriou Iēsou* bears public testimony that he has become Christ's property',<sup>28</sup> in Bultmann's phrase, he is 'stamped as the property of the Kyrios'.<sup>29</sup> Like Israel of old in her relationship to God, the Christian has become united to Christ in a suzerain-vassal relationship and, because of this, he is also incorporated into the covenant community of those similarly related to Christ, and these relationships are symbolised in baptism.

The thought of relationship is also inherent in the Trinitarian formula of Matthew. The command is to baptise 'into the name (*eis to onoma*) of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. The expression *eis to onoma* does not convey the thought of 'on the authority of', a meaning which has often been given these words but which, in point of fact, is strictly an exegetically

untenable interpretation. Rather the idea conveyed is 'in relation to', and the phrase almost certainly has a background in the similar baptismal expressions of rabbinical Judaism.<sup>30</sup> There is little to indicate that this expression, which has become the accepted baptismal formula of the Church, and, let us add, with good reason, was ever intended so to become. Rather it would seem that the phrase designated Christian baptism as distinct from other forms. It demonstrated the character of this new baptism, shewing in graphic form that the Christian was one upon whom the worthy name had been called (James 2.7) in an entirely new way far beyond the experience of the old Israel. The new covenant was a totally new relationship with God. There was also implied in this expression that the one baptised had taken upon himself the obligations and duties which were inherent in this new relationship, so that the phrase also expresses intention, as it did within the cultic framework of Judaism. The situation was somewhat similar to that which characterised that of the baptism of the Jewish proselyte. Baptism initiated him into the covenant community of Israel and the proselyte took upon himself the 'yoke of the Torah'; in the same way the Christian takes upon himself the 'yoke of Christ' (cf. Matt. 11.29) and demonstrates this acceptance in his baptism. Thus the one who is baptised 'into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit' has entered the sphere of an entirely new relationship with God. He knows God as Father in the unique way which Christ, the Son, came to reveal. Further, the knowledge of this revelation is made actual in real experience by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In one sense it could almost be said that Romans 8 provides a commentary on the reality of baptism into the Triune Name.

We may note that similar expressions served to designate other baptisms, to which the evidence of Acts 19.3 and 1 Corinthians 1.13 gives witness. The latter example is, of course, not a reference to an actual baptism but an example of Pauline sarcasm, but the example holds. Baptism in the early Church was thus 'into Christ', and this was the essential feature; it was a baptism into union with Christ Himself and, at the same time, into the corporate fellowship of all those who make up the Body

of Christ. The actual baptismal formula was a secondary matter and is thus virtually ignored. There is thus little information as far as the New Testament is concerned with regard to the actual form of words which were used at the baptismal ceremony, nor, indeed, from the data available, can we even assert that a standard form existed among all the churches of the first-century world. On the other hand, as we have tried to show, there is suggestive evidence that such forms did exist.<sup>31</sup>

### The Mode of Baptism

We are confronted by a similar indefiniteness when we come to consider the mode of baptism in apostolic times as we were in our discussion of the actual form of words used in the baptismal service. However, we can say that the weight of evidence points to a baptism by immersion, since, quite apart from other considerations, Christian baptism followed the practice of the Jewish *tebilah*. Immersion is also suggested in such passages as Acts 8.38, 39 together with the use of the Middle Voice at Acts 22.16; 1 Corinthians 6.11 and 10.2. Paul is commanded, 'Get yourself baptised', the Corinthians are described as those who 'got yourselves washed', and there is a close parallel here to the Jewish use of the phrase 'to take the baptismal bath'.<sup>32</sup> Those who have strongly maintained that immersion is the *only* valid mode of baptism have made much of the meaning of the verb *baptizein*, the usual verb in the New Testament to describe the act of baptising, and the intensive form of *baptein*, a word meaning originally 'to dip' or 'to dye'. This latter verb occurs on only three occasions in the New Testament, and in one of these (Rev. 19.13) it is a doubtful reading, the better attested reading being the verb *rhantizein* (to sprinkle). Neither in this case, nor in the other two instances of the verb's use (Luke 16.24; John 13.26), does the word bear any relation to baptism, nor indeed, in these instances, is there any suggestion or implication of immersion.

The intensive form of the verb is the one used in the New Testament to describe the act of baptising and it occurs on 76 occasions, but, unlike *baptein*, it is a rare word in the LXX, the

first-century BC Greek translation of the Old Testament. It occurs there on only four occasions. It is used in a literal sense implying immersion at 2 Kings 5.14 where it is descriptive of the bathing of Naaman in the Jordan, and similarly at Judith 12.7 where it is used of the heroine's bath. In a metaphorical sense the verb appears at Isaiah 21.4 ('lawlessness overwhelms me', *hē anomia me baptizei*) (cf. Mark 10.38f. and Luke 12.50 for similar metaphorical usage in the New Testament, though here the references also relate to the real baptism of Jesus), and it is used in relation to ceremonial washing at Ecclesiasticus 31.25 ('he that bathes himself after touching the dead', *baptizomenos apo nekrou*). Among the classical writers the word is used in an equally wide sense. They used *baptizein* to describe the sinking of a ship, the drawing of water or wine by dipping one vessel into another, of bathing, and, in a metaphorical sense, of a person being overwhelmed by questions or debt, in addition to the more general usage of dipping or dyeing in any manner.<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note that in this latter usage the verb soon ceased to be expressive of mode.

In the New Testament also, although the verb generally implies immersion, it need not necessarily do so. For example at Luke 11.38 it is used of the Pharisaic practice of washing the hands before meals. The Pharisee in question 'wondered that he (Jesus) had not washed (*ebaptisthē*) before dinner' and such a washing would not have been by immersing the hands in water, but rather by having water poured over them. In any case it would only have referred to a partial ablution. This is illustrated by the parallel passage at Mark 7.4 where the verb *rhantizein*, meaning 'to sprinkle' is used instead of *baptizein*. Indeed, even where the verb is used specifically of baptism, it cannot be maintained that in every case it implies or even suggests a literal immersion (cf. Matt. 3.11; Luke 12.50; 1 Cor. 10.1, 2). We have made this point, not because we are suggesting that immersion is not the proper mode of baptism, but in order to illustrate the dangers of that mode of exegesis which demands that a word can have but one meaning, and that, very often, one which fits in with preconceived doctrinal assumptions.

There are two important nouns derived from the verb, one,

*baptismos*, is essentially equivalent to the classical *baptisis*, and generally signifies a 'washing', usually one that is ceremonial or ritual (cf. Heb. 9.10, etc.). On the other hand *baptisma* is a genuine technical word, distinctively Christian in its origin, and reserved for baptism, whether literal or symbolical. It is unknown in the LXX, nor is it to be found in any of the classical writers, as one would expect from its Christian origin, and, being a purely technical word designating the rite of baptism, care must be exercised in drawing any conclusions from it as to the method of performing the rite. It always has to be remembered that the meaning of a word is dependent upon its usage and not its etymology, a matter not always sufficiently understood. In passing, the incident of the baptising of Cornelius and his household at Acts 10 is worthy of note. Taking v. 45 in conjunction with vv. 47 and 48 the suggestion is strong that here we are dealing with a case of baptism by affusion (note the apparent implication that water was brought). There seems little doubt that affusion baptism was practised in New Testament times, often perhaps, in association with immersion, and symbolising the pouring out of the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 12.13; Acts 2.17; Titus 3.6). In this respect it is interesting to note that the earliest mode of baptism attested by Christian art seems to have been affusion with the candidate standing in the water. On the other hand, there is no evidence that sprinkling was ever an apostolic practice, indeed, the evidence all points to it being a late introduction. There are references to the sprinkling of blood in the New Testament (cf. especially Heb. 9.19; 10.22, etc.), but the word is never used in a baptismal context.

In spite of the seeming inconclusiveness of the argument to this point, we are, however, able to say that the overall evidence of the New Testament and the early Church writings leads us to the conclusion that baptism was generally and characteristically administered by immersion. The earliest actual account of the administration of baptism is to be found in the *Didache*,

'Concerning baptism, this is the way you shall baptise. Having first recited all these things (i.e. the course of instruction in the 'Two Ways' to which we have already alluded), baptise into the

name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in living (i.e. flowing) water. If there is no flowing water, then baptise in other water, and if you are unable to use cold then use warm. But if you have neither, then pour water upon the head three times, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'<sup>34</sup>

Immersion was thus considered the regular mode of baptism, but, as Bruce has remarked, 'there is a spirit of eminent reasonableness here. The meaning of baptism is much more important than the form'.<sup>35</sup> It is unfortunate that so many of the protagonists in the baptismal controversy forgot this vital fact. It is also true that in immersion, baptism receives its greatest significance, a matter with which the great majority would be prepared to agree. Just as the Jewish proselyte cut himself off from all his past life and associations, just as all contact with his previous environment was severed on his entry into the covenant of Israel, and this severance was demonstrated in the washing of baptism, so also, for the Christian, baptism stands as the external sign that he has finished with the old world and has entered the new world in Christ. He is baptised 'into Christ', into union with the risen Lord and into the fellowship of His Church, and this must imply a complete revocation of all his past connexions. These are aspects of baptism which we shall be discussing in relation to the doctrine of baptism.

Suffice it to say in summary that while 'we have no precise information about the exact rite of Christian baptism in the New Testament . . . certainly it is total immersion that supplies the ordinance with its most vivid representation'.<sup>36</sup> In this connexion it is interesting to note that immersion remained the general rule in Western Christendom until mediaeval times. As late as the thirteenth century we find Thomas Aquinas writing of immersion as being a plainer setting forth of the burial of Christ and for this reason being a practice 'more general and more commendable'.<sup>37</sup> In 1311 the Council of Ravenna allowed a choice between immersion and affusion, and it was not until much later that the practice of sprinkling became such a widespread pattern of baptism. Immersion remains the accepted mode of the Orthodox and Coptic Churches, as it is also of the

Roman Catholic Ambrosian rite of Milan, as well as being the normal method among the various Free churches with 'baptist' principles, the Baptists themselves, the Christian Brethren, the Pentecostal Churches and so forth.

In spite of the paucity of evidence with regard to practical details in the New Testament we may, nonetheless, arrive at the following conclusions. In the first place baptism was regarded as the normal and necessary corollary of repentance and faith in Christ; a man believed and then he was baptised into Christ and His Church. Then, regardless of whatever formula may have been used, the essential nature of the baptism was that it was 'into Christ', and further, the normal mode was by immersion. On the other hand, and this is something which needs emphasis, it is not on these peripheral matters that the New Testament lays its major emphasis. The vital thing in baptism is not so much the outward rite, but what that rite symbolises in the life of the believer, and it is to the significance of baptism and its underlying theology that we must now turn our attention.

## NOTES

1. This viewpoint has certain implications with regard to the Reformed doctrine of the 'sufficiency of Scripture', a matter to which the writer's attention was drawn by Professor F. F. Bruce. Our answer to the problem will depend to the extent to which we regard Scripture as sufficient. It would seem to the writer that on matters of practice the New Testament gives little direction and what is of importance is the extent to which our church practice is true to the *theology* of the New Testament. To take one example, our celebration of the Lord's Supper today, whatever our ecclesiastical tradition, is a far different thing from the simple fellowship meals of the primitive Church. Yet, as Kurt Aland points out, 'the Church claims, and surely with right, that what she does in a new time and in a new way is a legitimate performance of what took place in early times in another way' (*Did the Early Church Baptise Infants?*, (ET 1963) p. 114), provided that it can be shown that what is being done is faithful to the spirit of the New Testament and does not run contrary to its theological principles.
2. Basil, *De Spiritu Sancto* 27.
3. J. Jeremias (*The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, (ET 1955) ch. 3) probably goes too far in his suggestion that there was a definite esoteric teaching in the early Church reserved for the full initiate (the *teleioi*). Such esoteric teaching seems to be a feature of third-century Christianity rather than first, and was almost certainly a borrowing from the practices of

- the mystery religions. By the time of Augustine it was a well established practice and baptismal candidates were not allowed to be present at the final stages of the eucharist. In the same way certain things were taught them only in the last few weeks before their baptism, e.g. only those baptised were supposed to be allowed to use the Lord's Prayer (cf. Augustine, *De Symbolo*, 1.16). The reason for this latter practice seems to have been that as baptism marked the reception of the Spirit it was not right that candidates should speak of 'our Father' until they had received the Holy Spirit by which 'we cry Abba, Father'.
4. G. Dix, *The Theology of Confirmation in relation to Baptism*, (1946) pp. 30ff.
  5. F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Romans in *TNTC*, (1963) p. 136.
  6. G. Dix, *op. cit.* p. 33.
  7. G. W. Bromiley, *Baptism and the Anglican Reformers*, (1953) p. 33.
  8. F. F. Bruce, Personal Communication, (1964).
  9. N. P. Williams, *Ideas of the Fall and Original Sin*, (1927) p. 550.
  10. E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology*, (ET 1955) p. 237.
  11. For a discussion of the early creeds and confessions and their development see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, (1950) pp. 1-29, and also the interesting discussion as Essay II in E. G. Selwyn, *Commentary on 1 Peter*, (1946).
  12. See the original essay of C. H. Dodd, 'The Framework of the Gospel Narrative', *ExT.*, (1932) xliii, pp. 396ff. and his full discussion in *The Apostolic Preaching and its Developments*, (1963 edn. = 1936).
  13. This expression (*suneidēseōs agathēs eperōtēma*) has been taken to mean 'an appeal to God for a clear conscience' thus expressing the fact that baptism is not a cleansing process itself but rather the ratification in symbol of God's forgiveness and inner cleansing (see *TWNT*, ii, p. 688 s.v. *eperōtēma*, and also E. G. Selwyn, *op. cit. ad loc.*). On the other hand the verb *eperōtaō* is used of a judicial examination (cf. Matt. 27.11; Mark 14.60; 15.2, 4; John 9.23; Acts 5.27) and thus the 'answer' could well signify the catechumen's affirmation of faith, and this seems to be more in line with the context.
  14. D. Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, (1956) pp. 106ff.
  15. E. Stauffer, *op. cit.* p. 236.
  16. Other possible references to this type of pre-baptismal teaching in the New Testament may underlie 2 Thess. 2.15; Rom. 16.17 and 1 Cor. 4.17. Also of significance with its reference to the double bondage is Rom. 6.15-18.
  17. Some see in 1 Cor. 11.26 a reference to a credal affirmation on the part of the gathered church at the Lord's Supper, but the present writer is of the opinion that the reference to proclaiming the Lord's death relates to the total symbolism of the Christian eucharist.
  18. *Clementine Recognitions*, 3.67, *Clementine Homilies*, 11.35.
  19. Hippolytus, *Apostolic Tradition*, 17.
  20. Two New Testament references should be especially noted. In the first place we have at Ephesians 5.14 the words,  
'Awake, O sleeper,  
Rise from the dead,  
And Christ shall give you light.'

- E. K. Simpson notes, 'the wording may well be that of a primitive Christian baptismal hymn . . . the very rhythm of the three *stichoi* is of a type associated in the Greek memory with religious initiation' (Commentary on Ephesians in *NLC*, (1957) p. 122n.). Secondly the express use of 'enlightened' at Hebrews 6.4 in what is almost certainly a baptismal context should be noted. (Cf. also Eph. 1.18 and also Justin, *Apol.* 1.61.12f., 65.1 as well as the Johannine teaching on Christ as light.)
21. For a fuller treatment of this disputed passage see P. W. Evans, *The Sacraments in the New Testament*, (1954) and also the standard commentaries *ad loc.* A good example of the somewhat cavalier treatment the passage has received from some critics is the remark of R. Bultmann who calls it, 'the legendary account in Matthew 28.19' (*Jesus and the Word*, (ET 1958) p. 111). Such judgments are largely subjective in nature, based on preconceived ideas, rather than evidence of true scientific criticism.
  22. Cf. Peter's speech at Pentecost (Acts 2.33ff.), and note the various triadic formulae, e.g. 1 Cor. 12.4ff.; 2 Cor. 1.21; 13.13; 1 Pet. 1.2; etc.
  23. J. G. Davies, *The Spirit, the Church and the Sacraments*, (1954) p. 97.
  24. *Didache* 7. The fact that this formula first appears in a document with such an obviously Jewish background would seem to militate against the view that 'while the trinitarian formula was appropriate to Gentiles turning to the true God from idols, baptism into the name of the Lord Jesus as Messiah was sufficient in the case of Jews or Samaritans, who had no need to profess monotheism' (F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, (1952) p. 187n.). The fact that the Gentile Galatians were baptised *eis Christon* also is suggestive that at this stage the trinitarian formula was not used for either Jews or Gentiles. It is interesting to note that the idea that baptism into the name of Christ refers mainly to Jews goes back at least as far as Cyprian (cf. *Epistle* 72.17).
  25. *TWNT* i. p. 539 (s.v. *baptō*, etc.).
  26. See the fuller discussion of this verse together with Titus 3.5 in Appendix II.
  27. On the other hand to say with R. Bultmann, 'in Christ . . . is primarily an ecclesiological formula' (*Theology of the New Testament*, (ET 1952) i. p. 311) is going much too far.
  28. F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 187. He makes the suggestion that these words could have been used as a baptismal formula.
  29. R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, i. p. 137.
  30. See *SB* i. pp. 1054ff. Had the phrase been intended to imply authority it would have been more likely rendered *en onomati* or *en tō(i) onomati*. (Cf. Acts 3.6 where the healing is carried out on the authority of Jesus, and Acts 10.48 in relation to baptism).
  31. Mention should be made of O. Cullmann's attempt to find a primitive formula in the use of *kōluein* in relation to baptism (*Baptism in the New Testament*, (ET 1950) pp. 71ff.). To the mind of the present writer Cullmann has not proved conclusively that the word did have a liturgical use in a ritual question as to whether there were factors which would prevent the candidate's baptism, and accordingly a verdict of 'not proven' would be returned. K. Aland (*Did the Early Church Baptise Infants?*, (ET 1963) p. 96) gives the most optimistic assessment of Cullmann's view

- the writer considers possible, and even this goes beyond what he would care to assert.
32. The construction appears to be a genuine Jewish-Hellenistic production and is certainly non-classical. See Judith 12.7 where *ebaptizō* translates *tabhal* which in the Qol means to 'dip oneself', 'to take the baptismal bath'.
  33. Cf. Plato, *Euthydemus* 227D, *Symposium* 176B, Plutarch, *Alexis* 76, Polybius, *Histories* 2.51.6 etc.
  34. *Didache* 7. In the third century Tertullian believed (*De Bapt.* 4) that ideally baptism should take place in a sea or in a pool.
  35. F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, (1958) p. 191.
  36. *Baptism in the New Testament*, Report of the Special Commission on Baptism of the Church of Scotland (1955) p. 46.
  37. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Tot. Theol.* iii. 66.7. It would be an interesting and profitable exercise to examine in detail the question of whether the New Testament teaching on baptism would be genuinely satisfied by any other mode except immersion, and this, after all, is the really important question.