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CONCLUSIONS

AT the beginning of this study we emphasised the vital and important place that baptism occupied in the life and thought of the early Church. It is our conviction that the Church of today must recapture something of this emphasis for the revitalisation of its spiritual life. Our study has been an attempt to assess and come to some understanding of the data with which the New Testament, the foundation of the life and faith of the early Church, supplies us. In the light of this evidence which we have gleaned from our sources; in the light of the teaching which we have derived from the New Testament, and which must surely remain the basis of the life and practice of the Church in this century as much as it was in the early days; in the light of all this, we say, we must reassess our own understanding and practice of baptism. We must ask ourselves whether the practice of baptism in our own church tradition is fundamentally true to the theology of the New Testament. We must ask ourselves whether this sacrament is as central to the life and thought, and especially the out-going message, of our churches today as it was in the first century. The churches of the Reformation have always insisted, and we believe rightly so, that the principles of Holy Scripture must represent the norm, the standard of the Church's life and conduct in any age; but can we say that this is true of our baptismal practice? There have been some welcome signs in recent years of a rethinking of fundamental presuppositions. There has been a realisation on the part of many churches that 'hitherto existing practices are unsatisfactory. The motives for the new orientation vary from church to church. . . . But common to them all is the deep

concern for a clearer understanding of the real meaning of baptism and for a truer expression of it in church life'.¹

Of all the questions which relate to baptism in this day we believe that the most important is to ascertain whether in fact our administration of the sacrament is such that it may become the basic event of our experience as Christian people, as members of the new community, and, indeed, as members of Christ Himself. In fact, are we able to say that our Christian life and experience has arisen out of this foundation experience of being baptised into Christ, this sacrament in which our spiritual incorporation into Christ becomes actualised to sense-experience and visible to the Church and the world? Is the nature of our commitment in this act of baptism being adequately expressed within the context of the life of worship, witness and work of our own churches? It has been well said that we 'must understand anew the implications of the fact that we have been baptised, that, as Christ came to minister, so must all Christians become ministers of His saving purpose according to the particular gift of the Spirit which each has received, as messengers of the hope revealed in Christ'.² The oneness of the Church of Christ, the co-equality of all believers in their Lord, the sharing of all in the gifts of the Spirit which each member is to express in the work, worship and witness of the Church, these are some of the practical corollaries which arise out of the 'one baptism' and which demand to be understood and expressed afresh.

It has been our prayerful hope that this study in New Testament baptism may prove of help in answering these and other questions which urgently confront our churches today. It is our conviction that only from an honest re-examination of the New Testament, and a willingness to conform humbly to its spirit, that there can arise a genuine unity of the Church of Christ.

NOTES

1. L. Vischer, *Ye Are Baptised*, (ET 1964) p. 7. That such welcome reassessments are going on is evidenced by the words of C. E. Pocknee (*The Parson's Handbook*, (1965) p. 119), 'it is now realised that much of our (i.e. Anglican) present theology and practice is based on late mediæval misconceptions, and there can be no satisfactory revision of the rites of

Baptism and Confirmation in the Book of Common Prayer until these matters are resolved'.

2. World Council of Churches, *The Evanston Report*, (1954) Section VI p. 162.