

APPENDIX I

THE ABSENCE OF BAPTISM IN THE GOSPEL NARRATIVES

THE absence of any reference to baptism from the time of John's baptism until the infant Church begins her ministry as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles when we meet the rite in a distinctively Christian setting, has occasioned considerable discussion, and has often been regarded as one of the problems of the New Testament. There are in fact two references which would indicate that our Lord countenanced baptism in the early stages of the ministry, one of these (John 3.22f.) would suggest that Jesus Himself administered baptism, an impression which is later corrected (John 4.2) by the statement that it was the disciples who administered the rite. Both these references belong to the pre-Galilean stage of the Lord's ministry, a period which is not mentioned by the Synoptic writers who leave us with the impression that Jesus returned to Galilee immediately after the baptism and the temptation in the wilderness. In view of the fact that John 3.26 seems to suggest that at some stage of the ministry Jesus was associated with John the Baptist, and also the further fact that it was from the circle of the Baptist's disciples that He drew many of His own followers, it would seem very probable that the baptism which is in view in these two references is the baptism of John, the baptism to repentance in view of the coming Messiah.

This view is given further weight if we accept the reading of John 1.30 proposed by C. H. Dodd,¹

'There is a man in my following who has taken precedence of me, because he is, and always has been, essentially my superior'.

It would seem possible, at any rate, that at this very early stage in the ministry of the Lord when He might have been seen as a follower of the Baptist, His mission was in fact somewhat similar to that of John himself. As Dodd puts it, 'he was acting as his own forerunner. His time . . . was not yet come. When, however, the Jewish authorities began to take note of his proceedings and when (immediately afterwards possibly) the work of the forerunner was forcibly cut short, the hour struck'.² It was then that Jesus went to Galilee proclaiming that the time was fulfilled and the kingdom of God had arrived (Mark 1.14). This would mark the beginning of the Galilean ministry which all the records show to have been the real commencement of the ministry of Jesus the Messiah.

These two instances in John's Gospel are the only references to any baptism being connected with the Lord Himself, or with His disciples, throughout the three years of His ministry. Accordingly, we must therefore conclude that either our Lord did not baptise other than at a preparatory stage of the ministry, or else that the Gospel writers, for some reason, do not mention it. If our Lord did countenance baptism, and we do have the two Johannine references to lend some support to this, it makes it much easier to understand how baptism took its place as the normal rite of entry into the new community immediately after the events of Pentecost. It is true of course that we have the missionary command of the Lord with which baptism was associated (Matt. 28.19), and as Stauffer has remarked this is something which must be taken seriously,³ but the missionary command is in a post-Easter context, immediately preceding Pentecost.

The only baptism that appears, therefore, in the context of the Gospels is the baptism of John, a preparatory rite which in turn only appears at the very beginning of the narratives, before the actual ministry has commenced. There is also a theological motive which may be discerned underlying this absence of baptism from the Gospels. Throughout the Gospels the baptism of Jesus Himself is consistently related to His death, it was viewed as a prefigurement of the saving events of the Passion, and His death and resurrection fulfilled all that which His

baptism had foreshadowed (Luke 12.50; Mark 10.38; Matt 20.22). These were the events which formed the basis for the establishment of the new community and for the baptism which marked entrance into that community, a baptism which was associated with the Messianic gift of the Spirit on all men, not only Him who was the Representative Man. As Lampe has written, it is 'as clearly implied in the Synoptists as it is explicitly affirmed by the Fourth Gospel that before the saving work of Jesus was completed, He "spoke of the Spirit which they that believed on Him *were to receive*; for the Spirit was not yet, because Jesus was not yet glorified". It is for the same reason that we are told that Jesus Himself did not baptise, until in His death He "baptised" all men'.⁴

Those who would be followers of Christ were also to be sharers in His death and resurrection, that baptism which He undertook for us, and this sharing is symbolically portrayed in the sacrament of Christian baptism. It is thus clear, that, as Clark has put it, 'Christian baptism remained an impossibility until in death Jesus had fulfilled his baptism for all men'.⁵ For the Apostles the baptism of John was fulfilled in the outpouring of Pentecost, but for the Church founded by their word the new rite of Christian baptism provided in a single act the fulfilment of John's baptism by their Lord and the gift of the Spirit which this fulfilment had made possible. Thus, the Gospel writers remained silent about any baptism during the Lord's ministry until, His purposes fulfilled, the Risen Lord commands His disciples to go into all the world, to make disciples and to baptise with a baptism which entered into the fulfilment of His own baptism in the events of Easter.

NOTES

1. C. H. Dodd, *Historical Tradition in the Fourth Gospel*, (1963) pp. 217f.
2. *Ibid.* p. 293.
3. E. Stauffer, *New Testament Theology*, (ET 1955) p. 160.
4. G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit*, (1950) p. 41.
5. N. Clark, *An Approach to the Theology of the Sacraments*, (1956) p. 18.