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CAN INFANT BAPTISM BE JUSTIFIED?

DR. D. M. BAILLIE'S article on "The Justification of Infant Baptism", which appeared in the *Quarterly* for January, 1943, is very welcome, since discussion of so important a matter has in recent years been rather neglected. The desire to avoid hindering Reunion has led to some side-tracking of the issue, either in the belief that it did not greatly matter, or that it could be solved as we go along, or in the hope that opposed views could be ecclesiastically synthesised. Controversy may have been declined less out of brotherly love than through timidity, as if Christian men could not be trusted to express their honest disagreements without quarrelling. Thereby we neither serve truth, foster charity nor promote unity. Every conference dealing with Reunion might well be reminded of the wise words of P. T. Forsyth: "It is strong Churches that make real union, Churches that believe in themselves and look also on the things of others" (*The Church and the Sacraments*, p. 139). This article aims at preserving that spirit.

Baptists hesitate about Infant Baptism for many reasons, amongst others because, theologically, the rite keeps such diverse company—some of it bad company. The most numerous community that practises it, the Roman Catholic Church, does so on the ground that the sacrament is the means of regeneration and is therefore necessary to salvation. "It is incumbent", says a modern Jesuit writer, "no matter what it costs us, to admit that infants, who have not received either Baptism of water or desire, cannot attain to the beatific vision" (*Baptism and Confirmation*, by L'Abbé D'Alès; Eng. trans., Sands & Co., 1929). Protestants, of course, repudiate such notions, but in view of the fact that they represent the meaning of Baptism for the vast majority of Christians, do they not prejudice the rite? Are we sure that such teaching does not infiltrate into Protestant minds? The authorities of a non-Roman London hospital refused to perform an operation upon a child perilously ill, till the father, who did not believe in Infant Baptism, consented to his child's baptism; to save his child's life he agreed. This illustrates the statement that the rite keeps bad theological company.

Beyond the Roman fold, widely differing explanations are offered of the effects of Baptism. Dr. N. Micklem rejects the idea that little children need to be cleansed from sin in Baptism but retains a link with "original sin" by defining it as "the whole nexus of worldly judgments and the power of an un-Christian environment"; Baptism transfers the child from this sphere and "most solemnly conveys to the child its right in the new humanity, the company of the redeemed" (*The Doctrine of our Redemption*, p. 66). For Dr. J. S. Whale, Infant Baptism emphasises "the objective givenness of the Gospel of Redemption" (*Christian Doctrine*, p. 164). Many Congregationalists regard Infant Baptism as having no other significance than that of a Dedication Service for children, but Dr. Whale will have none of this. He declares that "Infant Baptism guards against the irrelevant fancy known as 'dedicatory baptism', whereby parents who know no better suppose that in this rite they are dedicating their child to God" (op. cit. p. 165); that, he holds, is a secondary matter in the service. There are other intermediate explanations, ranging from Baptismal Regeneration with cleansing from Original Sin (apparently the oldest, most consistent and still most widely-held theory) down to a parental Dedication of the new-born child. Is there not something strange in this manifoldness of interpretation? It is natural to desire to retain a ceremony endeared by long association, but difficult if it can no longer be defended on the grounds which led to its original adoption. Baptists hold that in the New Testament there is a theological interpretation of the rite of Baptism, in such a passage as Romans vi, which has no relationship at all with these later explanations. The one name "Baptism" now signifies two observances entirely differing as to subject, meaning and method, and only one seems capable of reconciliation with the New Testament.

However, before we discuss the significance of any Sacrament, must we not determine the prior question of its institution? Can any rite have the rank of a Sacrament in the Church unless it can be traced to the command of our Lord? The importance of this is sometimes minimised, and it is said to be not enough to give a merely historical justification of Infant Baptism, or even to appeal to the practice of the primitive Church. The problems connected with Matthew xxviii. 19, 20 have been much over-emphasised, but those verses are not the

whole evidence for the Dominical Institution of Baptism, and the Reformed Churches have not surrendered the cardinal feature of a Sacrament that it "is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ" (*Shorter Catechism*, Q. 92). Dr. Whale denies that "Sacraments originate in our need of them"; when, however, we defend them only on the ground of the use we see in them, are we not in peril of adopting that poor line of argument? This is not the place to go into the whole problem of their divine origin, save to say that the evidence must include not only the baptismal narratives of the New Testament but also the doctrinal teaching associated with the ordinance. Have we a right to claim a foundation in the apostolic age for that which is inconsistent with the apostolic explanation?

Infant Baptism is sometimes inferred from the "household Baptisms". There are at most five such instances, and in three out of the five the surrounding narrative states that those who were baptised believed after hearing the word of God; that excludes infants. In the case of the households of Lydia and Stephanas, we recall that "household" may well mean *familia* and include adult slaves. There is no proof that Lydia was married, or that if married she had children, or that any children she possessed were with her in what was to her a foreign country. Moreover, when the released Apostle visits her house he finds there "brethren", i.e. fellow-believers, who are "exhorted" (Acts xvi. 40). Of the household of Stephanas, we know from 1 Cor. xvi. 16-17 that when St. Paul wrote the epistle (three or four years after his first contact with Corinth) the members of that household were old enough to have given themselves to the ministry of the saints, and old enough also to wield authority. In every New Testament case where specific information is given about the baptised company, they are said to be believers, and the clear cases should govern our interpretation of those that are obscure.

Early Christianity must be studied against the background of the Graeco-Roman world of the first century, which was characterised by a strong sense of family unity; the suggestion is therefore natural that when a man became a Christian the whole household (including any children) would be baptised with him. The presence of ideas in the environment of the early Church by no means suffices to prove their dominance within the Church, particularly when no positive evidence is available

to corroborate the influence of such ideas; indeed, there are factors which point in the opposite direction. Our Lord had spoken of His coming as resulting in the setting of father against son, so that a man's foes would be those of his own household; now, the intensely personal spiritual experience which thus divided families would not be without influence on the hitherto-accepted unity of the family, and further influence would be exerted by the insistence of the Gospel on personal decision and personal faith. In view of the fact that the Church was consciously in opposition to "the world", it is unsafe to assume that the prevalence of ways of thinking outside the Church proves their acceptance within.

At the most, these arguments are inferential and do no more than suggest a faint possibility of the early practice of Infant Baptism, but, to return again to the primary problem, they do not establish it as a Sacrament divinely instituted. Protestants have contended against the Roman Seven Sacraments on the ground that the added five do not originate in Christ's command and are not enjoined by Him as observances for all His people. Unless Infant Baptism can be traced back to Christ, it is no more than an ecclesiastical ceremony. Even a ceremony, however, though it may be ordained by a Church for all its own members, is not obligatory on other Christians; it is not even valid for the Church which prescribes it unless it is accordant with the Gospel, and the Baptist contention is that Infant Baptism fails to satisfy the latter condition.

Leaving the question of origination, Infant Baptism is justified by the claim that children thereby enter the Christian Church. Here there is a fundamental difference. For Baptists the Church includes believers only, not believers "and their seed". Further, many Baptists disagree with the view that Baptism is the gateway into the (visible) Church of Christ. A considerable section among us (though not the majority) carries this disagreement into practice by accepting into membership unbaptised believers. Churches which do this are called "Open Membership Churches", and their position was well expressed by Robert Hall's statement that there should be no terms of communion which are not also terms of salvation. Many others, associated with "Close Membership Churches", would agree in rejecting the idea that entry to the Church is by way of a Sacrament; the title to Church-membership, they would say,

is Christian belief and "a credible profession" of such belief; Baptism is required as being such a profession, but it is the belief, not the profession of it, which entitles the member to admission. And all Baptists would unite in denying that any Sacrament is operative independently of the spiritual status of the recipient.

It is common ground with Baptists and Non-Baptists alike that the large number of adult unbaptised Christians associated with the Friends and the Salvation Army are really members of Christ's Visible Church. We joyfully believe that many of our children in Baptist homes, at a very early age (by no means necessarily "adult") give their hearts to Christ; as soon as such turning to our Lord is understood, realised and avowed, we can and do welcome them into Church-membership.

What Church-membership privileges are really conferred on the baptised child which are denied to the unbaptised boy or girl in a Baptist Church? We treat the children in our Churches precisely as a non-Baptist minister treats those in his own ministerial charge. If Baptist parents attend his Church without seeking membership, does he make any difference at all in his pastoral relationship with their unbaptised children? The membership which Baptism is said to confer on an infant is partial, since admission to the Lord's Table is denied, and participation in worship, fellowship and Church responsibility is necessarily limited. It is nominal, incomplete, temporary, probationary, a vague privilege claiming a spiritual reference but based on natural birthright. Is there any real distinction for this world or the next between the baptised infant who is "a Church-member not in full communion" and the child in a Baptist Church?

It would be a necessary consequence of the position now being discussed that a minister should refuse Baptism to the offspring of parents where he was not assured of the Christian faith of at least the father or the mother. Is enquiry generally made about this matter? In 1939 a Report dealing with indiscriminate Baptism was presented to the Chapter of the Deanery of Poplar, in which it was suggested "that Baptism should always be refused (*except in danger of death*) where there is a strong reason to believe that the child will not be brought up as a practising Christian". (Note the italicised exception; what view of Baptism does it connote?) The Report made me thankful

to be delivered from the dilemma which must frequently be encountered. The existence of the problem shows, however, that Baptism is sought for children often through reasons that border on the superstitious, and the question again arises whether it is wise to continue a practice that lends itself to such dangerous misunderstanding.

It is certainly abundantly possible that Infant Baptism may exert influence for good on the infant. Whether it does so at the time of administration is a matter about which we have little material for a decision, but whatever may be claimed for it is equally applicable to the Dedication Services which are becoming increasingly customary in Baptist Churches. (They existed earlier, but had died out a century ago, and have since been revived. They are not regarded by any Baptists known to me as in any sense admitting the child to the Church.) Other good effects of Infant Baptism are associated with Confirmation, the occasion when the vows made by godparents are personally assumed. We can all agree that blessing must follow the prayers of parents at the font, and still more the later hour of personal self-surrender. A past act can be re-affirmed and given a yet deeper meaning, as happens to Baptists when they recall their Baptism and joyously renew its solemn vows; there is a difference, however, between the renewal of a conscious act and the endorsement of a happening only known to us through report. Yet we must repeat that to show that benefits ensue from it does not entitle us to claim for any rite the rank of a Sacrament. Sacraments rest on divine institution, not on human advantage.

In a single article it is impossible to deal with the whole of this many-sided problem. Amid much that has been left out, I trust that I have also omitted all unfairness, and that whatever of controversy there is may be as a healthy bracing air, not an unkind biting wind, for—to re-echo Forsyth's words—we Baptists, believing in our own cause, wish also to look on the things of others.

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