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Understanding of Baptism in Baptist Traditions, with Special Reference to Modern Trends[†]

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I must first acknowledge my limitations as a speaker on this subject. As in other traditions Baptist views of and practice of baptism are by no means uniform. I speak as a British Baptist and a student of the New Testament. I have no experience of Baptist thinking and polity in India or in the other Baptist groups represented in this meeting. Nor do I approach the subject with any special knowledge of doctrine or Church History. The most exhaustive recent Baptist treatment of baptism is G. R. Beasley-Murray's *Baptism in the New Testament*¹ and this paper is heavily indebted to him.

Paul rejoiced in Ephesians (4:5) that we have 'one Lord, one faith, one baptism'. Today Christians are divided on a number of difficult questions concerning baptism:

1. What is the relation of faith to baptism?
2. What is the proper mode of baptism?
3. What is its relationship to the laying-on of hands?
4. Does it do anything?
5. Should it be required for Church Membership?
6. Is it necessary for salvation?
7. Can we recognize the validity of different forms of baptism?

This paper will try to summarize Baptist positions as I know them on all these questions, rather than attempt an exhaustive treatment of any points. The first two questions (the relation to faith and the proper mode) are the points on which Baptists, together with other groups such as the Brethren, Disciples of Christ, Mennonites and Pentecostals, are either thought to hold peculiar views, or to be the only ones in step! The relation to faith is far the more important of these and will be discussed at length.

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† A Paper presented at the Joint Staff Conference of Morning Star College, Bishop's College and Serampore College on Saturday 24th January, 1976.

¹ London: Macmillan, 1962; paperback edition, Exeter: Paternoster, 1972.

1. What is the relation of faith to baptism?

The main distinctive emphasis of Baptists is their insistence on faith *before* baptism. This they prefer to describe as 'believers' baptism'. 'Adult baptism' does not express the point at issue and is inaccurate in that some Baptists in the U.S.A. baptize children even as young as eight years old on profession of their faith. In Britain, however, the earliest age for candidates is usually about fifteen.

The origins of infant baptism are obscure. Karl Barth dropped a bombshell in 1943 when he said in a lecture that he could find no evidence for infant baptism in the New Testament and condemned as fundamentally unsatisfactory any baptism of children, even those of Christian parents.² In reaction to this Joachim Jeremias (*Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries*, 1958 revised) was confident that it could be traced back to the New Testament, but Kurt Aland in *Did the Early Church Baptize Infants?* (1961, E. T. London: S.C.M., 1963) concluded from the same material that evidence for the practice is not earlier than the last years of the second century, though he continues to believe that it is both necessary and legitimate today. Most New Testament scholars agree that there is little or no evidence for the practice of infant baptism in the New Testament period.

Perhaps the best argument for it is the baptism of households, namely in Acts the households of Lydia (16:15), the Philippian Jailor and Crispus, and in 1 Corinthians that of Stephanas. We cannot say whether these households included infants or not. However, there are references to faith in some of these passages which make it unlikely that members of a family were baptized on the strength of the confession made by the head of the family irrespective of their own convictions. Thus when Paul tells the Philippian Jailor 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household' (Acts 16:31), he does not imply that the household would be saved by the faith of the Jailor alone, but rather that the same condition of faith applies to the household as to the Jailor. Similarly the faith of the household of Crispus (Acts 18:8) is made explicit: 'Crispus . . . believed in the Lord, together with all his household; and many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.'

Appeal is made to the Biblical conception of corporate solidarity to strengthen the argument from the baptism of households. However, in its extreme form, at any rate, as in the story of Achan (Joshua 7, cf. 22:20), this concept was a degrading of the national religion. Jeremiah and Ezekiel expressed the height of Jewish theology when they abandoned the proverb 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge' (Jer. 31:29 f., Ezek. 18). They

² Cf. K. Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism* (E. T. by E. A. Payne), London: S. C. M., 1948. See further his *Church Dogmatics: Vol. IV. The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Part 4 (E. T. by G. W. Bromiley), Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1969, which gives Barth's final thoughts on the subject of baptism. In a review of this in *Indian Journal of Theology*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (January—March 1973), pp. 37-40, R. H. S. Boyd finds his case against infant baptism a disturbingly convincing one.

did not repudiate the corporate idea altogether but they did look forward to the age of the New Covenant when individual religion would be vital. It is clear from the sayings of Jesus that this emphasis on personal responsibility was fulfilled through Him and that He expected that on occasion His message would split families: 'Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division; (52) for henceforth in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three; (53) they will be divided, father against son and son against father. . .' (Luke 12:51-53).

1 Corinthians 7:14 is commonly used as evidence for infant baptism: 'For the unbelieving husband is consecrated through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is consecrated through her husband. Otherwise, your children would be unclean, but as it is they are holy.' It is argued either that if the children are 'holy' they must have been baptized, or alternatively 'the fact that they are "holy", that they are already within the Holy People, the New Israel, demands their baptism' (The Church of Scotland Interim Report of the Special Commission on Baptism, 1955 Report, p. 27).³ It was, however, pointed out long ago in the *International Critical Commentary* on 1 Corinthians (Archibald Robertson, Alfred Plummer, 1911) that Paul is arguing here back from the children to the parents. It is not easy to define what is meant by 'holy', but it is clear that Paul's argument depends on the equation of the holiness of the children and that of the unbelieving partner. As the ICC says: 'He is not assuming that the child of a Christian parent would be baptized; that would spoil rather than help his argument, for it would imply that the child was not *hagios* till it was baptized. The verse throws no light on the question of infant baptism' (p. 142). Indeed it may be argued that the children have not been baptized and should not be baptized any more than the unbelieving partner has been or should be.

It has been suggested that the story of the Blessing of the Children in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 10:13-16; Matt. 19:13-15; Luke 18:15-17) has been included by the evangelists with the intention of supporting infant baptism. Much has been made of Luke's replacement of Mark's *paidia* (children 10:13) by *brephe* (infants 18:15). This is not necessarily significant. Luke may well be using a different word for variety without implying that all the children concerned were babes-in-arms. This is supported by his reverting to Mark's word *paidia* (children) in the following words of Jesus, 'Let the children come to me'. He could easily have written 'Allow the infants to be brought to me' had he been consciously supporting infant baptism.

There is, however, general agreement on both sides of the baptismal debate that in any case it is not enough to appeal to Apostolic practice, it is rather the theological principles that must determine our practice today. Perhaps the most popular theological argument from the New

³ Cf. *The Biblical Doctrine of Baptism, A Study Document issued by The Special Commission on Baptism of the Church of Scotland*, Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1958, pp. 53-54.

Testament for infant baptism today is its analogy with circumcision. This argument stresses the continuity of the Old Covenant with the New. Baptism in the New is equated with circumcision in the Old. There is of course continuity between the Covenants but this view blurs the equally important distinction between them and is in danger of minimizing the tremendous change that the death and resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit have made. The two dispensations are strikingly contrasted in the New Testament as the dispensation of life and the dispensation of death, that of condemnation and that of forgiveness and righteousness, a transient administration and an eternal one. The argument from circumcision cannot be reconciled with Paul's teaching in Galatians 3: the Covenant with Abraham remains in force, but he received a promise now realized in Christ. The people of the Covenant are no longer the Jewish Nation but the Body of Christ. The way men enter this Covenant is not by birth but in baptism by faith: 'It is men of faith who are sons of Abraham' (Gal. 3:7).

The actual relationship of circumcision to baptism in the New Testament is not clear. It is clear, however, that the large number of Jewish Christians who continued to practice circumcision *and* baptism could not have thought, as do some modern supporters of infant baptism that circumcision meant to them, in the words of Marcel, 'the sign and seal of the remission of sins, of justification, of change of heart, of sanctification, of the objective work of the grace of God'.⁴ The difficult passage on circumcision and baptism in Colossians 2:11 contrasts rather than compares the two, as G. W. H. Lampe, the Anglican, has pointed out.⁵ 'In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in the circumcision of Christ; (12) and you were buried with him in baptism. . .' The difficult phrase 'the circumcision of Christ' is now believed by most exegetes to refer to the death of Christ rather than the baptism which he instituted.

It is clear in a number of New Testament passages that faith is regarded as a condition of baptism and baptism is looked upon as the supreme confession of faith. Acts 8:37: 'And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart you may." And he replied, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God".' This verse is from the Western Text, was probably not in the original and is therefore relegated to the margin in modern versions, but it none the less is early evidence of an emphasis on the confession of faith in baptism. Other passages where the confession at baptism may be referred to are: Romans 10:9 'If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved'; Ephesians 5:26 'That he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing

⁴ P. C. Marcel, *The Biblical Doctrine of Infant Baptism* (E. T. by P. E. Hughes), London, 1953, pp. 155-156.

⁵ *The Seal of the Spirit*, London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1951, p. 5.

of water with the word;’ and 1 Peter 3:21 ‘Baptism . . . now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience.’

Cullmann⁶ argues that in the New Testament faith is intended to follow baptism but not necessarily to precede it. For this he cites such passages as Romans 6:1 ff. and 1 Corinthians 10:1 ff., where Paul reminds his readers of their baptism in the past and urges them to live up to it in the present. Cullmann’s explanation of the necessity of faith *before* baptism in New Testament times is that the Church had to have an indication in that situation that faith would *follow* baptism. Faith is mentioned so many times only because the people the Church was baptizing were adult heathen or Jews. Today God still uses faith to indicate to the Church which adult heathen should be baptized, but He also uses the fact that a child is born of Christian parents to indicate that he should be baptized. Cullmann writes: ‘The case of the infant . . . is so far different from an unbelieving adult, that the natural membership of a Christian family conferred on him by his birth, or at least the possession of Christian parents . . . is a sign for the Church that the divine baptismal event will in his case be completed, and that he will really be incorporated in the Church of Christ.’⁷ He is opposed to indiscriminate baptism; the Church must have a sign that faith will follow. This sign is either faith or a Christian family. Karl Barth, on the contrary, asserted: ‘From the New Testament standpoint it is impossible to say that ‘everyone born of Christian parents is born into the Christian Church (*Gemeinde*)’.⁸ If we take ‘into the Christian Church’ in the sense that New Testament baptism incorporated a person into the Body of Christ this is obviously true. If having Christian parents is God’s indication of future faith it is clear that in practice God is very often mistaken!

A common explanation of believers’ baptism in the New Testament Church is that it was in the situation of a missionary Church which is unlike a situation where the Church has become established. This distinction is very doubtful. Even when the Church has become more established it is still in a missionary situation both by reason of the many outside the Church and because each succeeding generation must be evangelised.

While Paedo-Baptist theologians admit that the theology of baptism in the New Testament is applied to the baptism of believers, they are divided on the question whether this theology is applicable without adaptation to the practice of infant baptism. W. F. Flemington, however, is certain that it is not. ‘It cannot be too strongly emphasised’, he writes, ‘that many of the difficulties about the doctrine of baptism

⁶ O. Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament* (E. T.), London: S. C. M., 1950.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁸ *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, p. 4. Barth’s quotation is from A. Ritschl, *Unterricht i.d. chr. Rel.*, para. 35.

arise because statements of St Paul and others in the New Testament about *adult* baptism as they knew it in the first century A.D. are applied, without modification, to *infant* baptism as most Christian communions know it today.⁹ Flemington is a Methodist and recent Anglican writers have consistently agreed. If consideration is taken of the New Testament teaching of the significance of baptism with regard to confession of faith, dying and rising with Christ, forgiveness of sins, and entry into the Church one must agree that these must undergo considerable modification before becoming applicable to infants as they are to believers. Infant baptism is often regarded as a prayer for these blessings to be imparted to the child through faith later in life. In this case the faith of the sponsors and/or parents and the Church are central to the act and they may pledge themselves to bring up the child in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. It is hard to see how they can reasonably pledge more than this. They are certainly not able to pledge that the child *will* appropriate the promises of baptism to himself and the New Testament knows nothing of vicarious faith effective for another's salvation. In this case, however, baptism has been emptied of all its distinctive significance and has come to mean much the same as a Baptist service for the Presentation (or Dedication) of Infant. It is to be hoped that no one now believes with Luther that an infant is capable of faith and that the temptation to appeal to modern psychological knowledge of the subconscious will be resisted.

The most popular significance attributed to infant baptism in our day is that of prevenient grace. Nathaniel Micklem wrote: 'Baptism is pre-eminently the sacrament of the prevenient grace of God, of the historic, finished work of Christ. It declares that whilst we were yet sinners, or before ever we were born or thought of, Christ died for us.'¹⁰ It is certainly true that in some passages of the New Testament this aspect of baptism is clearly brought out, for example, in Romans 6. It must be recognized, however, that emphasis on the initiative of God must never minimize the responsibility of the individual person. W. F. Flemington goes so far as to say that infant baptism is more evangelical than believers' baptism because the latter embodies less effectively 'the primary truth of the Christian Gospel that the grace of God comes before everything else, and that man's only hope of salvation rests upon that Act of God in Christ Jesus from which this sacrament draws all its meaning and efficacy'.¹¹ It may be argued, on the contrary, that the prevenient grace of God is better seen in the baptism of one who can look back and marvel at the way in which that grace has led him to baptism, which, far from being divorced from the 'Act of God in Christ Jesus' draws most of its significance from the death and resurrection of Jesus, as expounded in Romans 6,

⁹ *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*, London: S.P.C.K., 1957, p. 82.

¹⁰ *The Sacraments, Christian Worship*, Oxford, 1936, p. 248.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 146-147.

especially when it is practised by immersion. If believers' baptism is accused of obscuring the antecedence of Christ's work to faith one imagines that the Apostles would be somewhat perplexed by the charge.

One criticism that may be levelled quite justly at Baptists is their lack of a theology of children. This reflects the almost complete silence of the Scriptures on the subject, but recently Baptists have got a conscience about it and have started to work such a theology out. 1 Corinthians 7:14 may help in the case of children who have at least one Christian parent. The importance of Family Worship rather than separate Sunday Schools has been recognized. For some time now, though only since the beginning of this century, Baptists have had a ceremony of Presentation or Dedication for infants. This was first introduced in response to requests from Christian parents, and illustrates how deep a need is felt for some such ceremony. The idea is based on the presentation of Jesus in the Temple (Luke 2:22 ff), and has been influenced also by the Blessing of the Children. It is popular to say that it is the dedication of the parents and not the child, but this is an over-simplification. There are four parts to the short ceremony as it is practised in Britain today: a thanksgiving to God for the child, the promise of the parents to bring the child up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord, the promise of the Church to accept the responsibility of teaching and training the child, and finally the Levitical blessing upon the child. Ministers differ as to whether they accept children of parents who are not members of or in the immediate circle of the Church, but it is possible for the promise of the parents to be omitted and the service still to have plenty of meaning.

2. What is the proper mode of baptism?

Baptists stress that the issue of whether only believers should be baptized is primary and the question of the mode of baptism is, compared with that, secondary. The Anabaptists generally baptized by affusion and the early English Baptists did so until they looked more closely at the New Testament. However, Baptists today insist that the mode is of great importance. If baptism is regarded as a symbolic act then it is important that the means of operation should follow the symbolism. It is generally agreed that John's baptism and any Jewish antecedent to it were probably by total immersion so that the whole body would be immersed in the cleansing element to symbolise complete dedication. The etymology of baptize, 'to dip' is in accord with this and a number of New Testament contexts fit in best with total immersion: e.g. the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:10) and the baptism of the Ethiopian Eunuch (Acts 8:38, 39). It seems clear that Paul's exposition in Romans 6 of the believer's union with Christ in His dying and rising draws its significance from total immersion. Much of the symbolism is lost when the rite is practised by other modes. In the Indian context immersion is increasingly used for adult converts by Paedo-Baptist Churches.

Three forms of immersion are known to me. The most common in Britain is for the candidate to be lowered on his back, the force of the water helping to raise him. This is most in accord with the symbolism of Romans 6. Another way is for the candidate to kneel in the water and for his head and shoulders to be pushed forward, and a third way often used in deep pools and rivers in India and Africa is for the person to stand in the water up to his neck and to be pushed down so that his head is immersed briefly.

Sometimes in Baptist Church rules where membership or office-bearing are restricted to those baptized, exceptions are made for those not allowed to be baptized for medical reasons. In such instances I should recommend another more convenient mode of baptism rather than omitting the baptism altogether, which has often been the case. There may be other circumstances where shortage of water makes immersion difficult and most Baptists would not object to adapting the mode to suit the circumstances.

3. What is its relationship to the laying-on of hands?

Baptists do not accept any arguments for the separate rite of Confirmation that relate it to the New Testament. The laying-on of hands of the Samaritans in Acts 8:17, which followed baptism after an interval, is no parallel to the Confirmation of those baptized in infancy. The precise significance of that incident is much debated, particularly with regard to the receiving of the Holy Spirit as a result of the laying-on of the Apostles' hands, but that the separate laying-on of hands after an interval was an exceptional case is quite clear. G. W. H. Lampe, the Anglican, concludes in his book *The Seal of the Spirit* that 'the laying on of hands described in Acts has little or no direct connection with the use of the same sign in Confirmation today'.¹²

In the regulations of the Church of North India it is prescribed that when believers' baptism is practised it is to be followed by admission into communicant membership, which includes 'prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit, the laying on of hands by the bishop or presbyter and the acknowledgement of his attaining the full responsibilities of Church membership'. This seems to imply that the gift of the Holy Spirit is related to Confirmation rather than to baptism. This is a doctrine widely held by Anglicans, but questioned by Prof. Lampe, who shows that baptism rather than the laying-on of hands is the Pauline 'seal of the Spirit'.

There is disagreement among Baptists as to whether to include the laying-on of hands with baptism. This is practised in some Baptist groups on the Continent of Europe, but has not been general in Britain. Beasley-Murray argues for it,¹³ but another British Baptist, R. E. O. White, is opposed to it as well as to the various other additions to the

¹² Page 80.

¹³ *Op. Cit.*, pp. 122-125, 394-395.

rite that have been made in later traditions.¹⁴ The disagreement arises from the incomplete evidence of the New Testament. It is not clear whether it was a usual part of the rite or used for special reasons on some occasions. There is a trend in British Baptist Churches toward including it, but generally we use the laying-on of hands only for the ordination of a minister. Those in the charismatic movement may use the laying-on of hands at any time and any number of times to seek to bring about 'charismatic' experiences.

4. Does it do anything?

The popular view among Baptists is that baptism is 'only a symbol'. For this reason they have often preferred to call it an Ordinance of the Lord rather than a sacrament. This is one respect in which Baptists have taken New Testament baptism less seriously than Paedo-Baptists. However, in recent years some Baptist writers have stressed the basis in the New Testament for a sacramental view, in which it is not simply a sign of faith, but an effective seal of it.¹⁵ Faith and baptism together are seen as the means through which God grants forgiveness of sins, bestows new life and the gift of the Spirit. This view should, of course, be distinguished completely from any teaching that regards baptism as an effective *opus operatum* irrespective of faith. It was in reaction against such a view that the stress on baptism as 'just a symbol' arose. However, a sacramental view is not without its difficulties, particularly in seeking to instruct candidates what to expect to happen or what to believe will have happened in their baptism. Dr W. M. S. West has written: 'He would be a very wise man who would try to define exactly God's activity in the rite of baptism, but he would certainly be foolish to deny such activity.'¹⁶ This view of efficacy depends on the faith of the baptized, so that most Baptists could not ascribe any more efficacy to infant baptism than they could to an infant presentation service, which may be regarded as including a prayer of blessing for the child.

Three matters call for particular treatment.

(i) *The place of the Holy Spirit in baptismal experience and theology.* The 1948 Statement of Faith of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland reads: 'As a means of grace to the believer and to the Church, and as an act of obedience to our Lord's command, we treasure this sacrament. The New Testament clearly

¹⁴ Cf. *The Biblical Doctrine of Initiation*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960.

¹⁵ Karl Barth, on the other hand, in *Church Dogmatics: Vol. IV, The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Part 4 maintains that baptism should not be regarded as a sacrament at all, but as the human response to what God has already given in baptism with the Spirit (see the review by R. H. S. Boyd mentioned in note 2 above).

¹⁶ *The Pattern of the Church* (ed. A. Gilmore), London: Lutterworth, 1963, p. 38.

indicates a connection of the gift of the Holy Spirit with the experience of baptism which, without making the rite the necessary or inevitable channel of that gift, yet makes it the appropriate occasion of a new and deeper reception of it'. Similarly many Baptists would agree with Dr D. S. Russell, who writes that baptism 'is an experience in which the Holy Spirit, who was given to us at our conversion, deepens still further the experience of God's grace' (*Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. XVII, 1957-8, p. 72). Beasley-Murray, however, argues strongly that the New Testament witnesses to a different understanding in the Early Church in which baptism was the occasion not for a fresh experience, but for *the* experience of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

Definition is further complicated by the question of the relationship of the gift of the Spirit to actual spiritual experiences, in particular 'charismatic' experiences, especially in view of the exclusive claims sometimes made for such experiences. Undoubtedly knowledge of this kind of experience today makes us more able to understand and evaluate both the experiences reflected in Acts and Lucan theology. Religious experience including glossolalia occurs after baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus and the laying-on of hands in Acts 19:6 in the case of the 'disciples' at Ephesus, and it occurs *before* baptism in the case of Cornelius and his friends in Acts 10:44-48. In the case of the Samaritans the Holy Spirit had not fallen on them at baptism, but did so following the later laying-on of hands by Peter and John (Acts 8:14-17). Here glossolalia is not mentioned. The modern charismatic movement reflects all these chronological sequences. Pentecostalist Churches usually regard 'baptism in the Holy Spirit' as a second blessing coming some time after baptism in water, but many in the charismatic movement believe that ideally baptism itself should be the occasion when this experience is received. In the charismatic movement there are also many who have 'charismatic' experiences before being baptized. Even in such instances baptism is usually administered later. Baptists generally would not wish to separate baptism in the Holy Spirit from baptism in water theologically, but due account must always be made of the Holy Spirit's diverse ways of working. Apart from the words of John the Baptist concerning Jesus, being baptized in the Holy Spirit or by the Holy Spirit is mentioned only once in the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 11:13, 'For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body'—and here it clearly applies to all Christians. Paul assumes that all Christians have been baptized.

(ii) *The relationship between baptism and regeneration.* A second aspect of efficacy which is a matter of controversy is the relationship between baptism and regeneration. Any view which holds that baptism in itself regenerates a person, or in particular an infant, is regarded by Baptists as a very serious misunderstanding of the sacrament. In this, of course, they would be joined by many Paedo-Baptists. The Anglican-Methodist conversations in Britain naturally

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 277.

bypassed most of the important questions of baptismal controversy as both Churches accept infant baptism, but disquiet was expressed by the dissenting Methodist representatives 'over the doctrines of baptismal regeneration and eucharistic sacrifice as they are referred to in the report'.¹⁸ The report itself says:

Baptism, then, is the sign and seal of the new life in Christ. The child baptised is *regenerate*. That term has given rise to considerable controversy. If *regenerate* means the mature experience of a Christian believer, clearly it cannot be applied to infants. If, however, it refers to the initiation of the Christian life or to the fact that every child in baptism is given the status of a child of God within the family of the redeemed, is it not a right and proper word to use? Certainly the child is not conscious of the new birth but, if the analogy of birth is to be considered apposite, due recognition must be given to the operation of grace in unconscious processes which may find their fruition in faith and love. In any case, none of those admitted to believers' baptism would claim regeneration in the sense that their life was uninterrupted communion with God.¹⁹

The argument here seems to me to be very weak and an example of the difficulty of applying the New Testament theology of baptism to infants. The Church of North India Constitution avoids regeneration in its definition of baptism, but referring to the later profession of faith of one baptized in infancy it says that he should recognise 'in that baptism the outward visible sign of the regenerating grace of God', which may be interpreted conveniently in different ways (p. 11).

(iii) *Infant Baptism and 'Original Sin'*. Thirdly and closely connected with the idea of regeneration in infant baptism has been the removal of 'original sin', i.e. the divinely prescribed remedy for the guilt of original sin is said to be baptism, in which the guilt is washed away and the infant regenerated by the grace of God. The idea of inherited guilt we believe to be a wrong interpretation of Paul's idea of an inherent tendency to sin in the human race (Romans 5). It seems that it was St Augustine who, knowing that in the New Testament baptism was for the remission of sins, concluded that, as infants had no sins of their own to confess, the pardoning of racial guilt inherited from Adam was the reason why the Church baptized infants. As R. L. Child has written, 'It argues a very strange conception of God indeed to think that he holds an infant responsible for the kind of world into which he has been born.'²⁰ The further notion that guilt can be washed away without the person concerned even knowing that he has contracted it is foreign to Biblical teaching of our relationship to God in Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ *Conversations between the Church of England and the Methodist Church, A Report*, London: Church Information Office and Epworth Press, 1963, p. 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²⁰ *A Conversation about Baptism*, London: S. C. M., 1963, p. 44.

5. Should it be required for Church Membership?

In the New Testament baptism is the ceremony that all those who come to faith in Christ are expected to undergo. One of its meanings, therefore, is becoming a member of the community of the redeemed, of the Church, of the True Israel. It must be emphasised that the doctrine of baptism cannot be considered in isolation from our doctrines of the Church. Johannes Schneider asks: 'Does the Church of Jesus Christ consist of persons who believe, have been baptised and are filled with the Holy Spirit, having already heard Christ's message of salvation? Or is she the Church of the baptised, who prior to their baptism have neither understood the message of salvation nor confessed their faith, so that this Church—as indeed is in fact now the case—consists in part of believing Christians and in part of unbelievers, who in spite of a baptism administered to them in childhood fail to confess Christ as their Lord and Saviour?'²¹ Schneider explains the danger of infant baptism as follows: 'Infant baptism leads inevitably to a Church embracing the whole community, which in spite of all the safeguards it creates for itself (religious instruction, Confirmation) . . . is far from being the *ecclesia* of God in the New Testament sense. . . . A church embracing the whole community is an illusion, which can only maintain itself when one adopts an unbiblical sacramental notion or the idea of the Church as an institution (Heilsanstalt), but does not really understand it as in any decisive sense the fellowship of believers and those called to be saints.'²² 'In the history of the Church, infant baptism has been the means used for the 'conversion' of whole nations. Though in a more restricted measure, this is still the case today. But a superficial 'Christianity', whether it employ forcible means or depend on a mere traditional piety, represents a misunderstanding of the Risen Lord's command regarding baptism. The saving work of Christ is effectual for the whole world. Salvation is, however, granted only to those who lay hold of it by faith.'²³

Such an understanding was the basis of the original practice of British Baptists. They did not become Baptists because they disagreed with the established Church on the subject of Baptism. They were one group of separatists from the established Church and their reason for separation was disagreement on the doctrine of the Church. As opposed to a state Church they believed the New Testament model to be that of a gathered community: the voluntary coming together of believers in any place to form a fellowship and be the Church, gathered together in Christ's name. The question was then asked,

²¹ *Baptism and Church in the New Testament* (E. T. by E. A. Payne) London: Carey Kingsgate, 1957, p. 45.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 47. Cf. also K. Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, pp. 52-54.

'What is the means of entry into this community?' The New Testament answer was clearly baptism.

However, it is a curious fact that on this point Baptists in Britain have often taken baptism less seriously than Paedo-Baptist groups, because a very large number of our Churches are open membership Churches, i.e. people are allowed to become members on a simple profession of faith without baptism. The historical reason for this was the stress on liberty of the individual conscience as opposed to State regulation. At first, probably, all of the separatists would have received baptism as infants, and even those convinced of the rightness of believers' baptism had no wish to force their views on their brethren. In the course of time this has meant that many members of Baptist Churches have not been baptized at all, that baptism has been an optional extra and in some circumstances there is a danger of having first class and second class members. It has also meant that the connection between baptism and Church membership has been obscured, the stress being on the individual's following the example of the Lord, and being buried and raised with Him. I myself was baptized some weeks *after* I had been admitted into Church membership. The usual pattern, however, has been that candidates have been baptized on one occasion and received into the membership of the local Church a week or more later.

In recent years there has been a renewed appreciation of baptism as entry into the Church. There has been a trend towards overcoming the practical problems and receiving candidates into the local Church in the same service as their baptism before the Communion is celebrated. It is stressed, of course, that baptism means entry into the worldwide Church, not simply into a local Church, and certainly not into the Baptist Denomination! Many today would feel that on an issue such as this, where the Scripture speaks plainly, the Churches are right to require baptism, and considerations of personal liberty do not arise.

The question of whether baptism should be required of converts from Hinduism is being widely debated especially due to the success of the Subba Rao movement in South India. The analogy of the Salvation Army is often being used. William Booth omitted the sacraments under the influence of the Quakers. The Quakers originally abandoned the sacraments because of the great abuses of them that were current. Later they evolved the reasoning which sees the whole of life as sacramental. The prestige of the Salvation Army, which it richly deserves, must not blind us to its doctrinal poverty, which many of its officers would be the first to confess. It is interesting that the British Baptist T. R. Glover was at one time attracted to Quakerism, but on an extended visit to India during the 1914-18 War for the Y.M.C.A. he met students who wanted to be Christians but remain as they were, making no profession of faith. He felt that they could never be truly Christians or spread the Gospel if they did not make

a public profession, and he became much more convinced of the value of baptism.²⁴

6. Is it necessary for salvation?

While recent study of baptism in the New Testament has stressed its far-reaching significance (some would say exaggerated it!), and many Baptists value baptism more highly than ever before, they do not believe that in any sense it is necessary for salvation. Rushed attempts to bring baptism to infants and catechumens apparently about to die show a sad misunderstanding of the grace of God and the nature of His salvation. The New Testament texts that are used to support the necessity of baptism are evidence for its importance, for its universal practice in the Early Church and for its being an effective sign of faith, but they cannot be used as evidence for regarding a ceremony as such as essential for salvation when the teaching of the New Testament on faith and the biblical criticism of any purely materialistic significance of ordinances are taken into consideration.

Three New Testament passages might be used to support this notion:

- (i) Mark 16:16—He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned.

It is significant that the second clause here does not mention baptism. I cannot imagine it reading 'He who does not believe and/or is not baptized will be condemned'.

- (ii) John 3:5—Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God.

Many suggestions have been made for the interpretation of 'water' here, but very probably the reference is to baptism. This verse emphasises the significance of it and its symbolism, but in the context of Johannine theology as a whole it must be seen as the sign of the rebirth of the Spirit and of the human response of faith, for 'he who believes in him is not condemned, he who does not believe is condemned already' (v. 18 of the same chapter).

- (iii) 1 Peter 3:21—Baptism . . . now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This passage is an explicit denial that the external rite is of the essence of baptism. Rather its power depends upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ and is operative through the response the believer makes. This response is indicated whether the words mean 'the prayer to God for a good conscience' or 'the pledge to God proceeding from

²⁴ H. Cook, *What Baptists Stand For*, London: Carey Kingsgate, 1964 (5th. ed.) pp. 133-134.

a good conscience'. Baptism is certainly regarded as the automatic ceremony for expressing commitment to God, but the emphasis away from the external forbids us to base any doctrine that an external rite is necessary for salvation on this verse.

Beasley-Murray acknowledges that most Christians would be willing to accord to baptism a *necessitas praecepti* or a *necessitas non absoluta sed ordinata*, but he prefers not to use the word 'necessity' at all as it is so open to misunderstanding. He asks: 'Is it not better to recognise positively that God has graciously given the sacraments for our good and that it is our part to receive them?'²⁵

7. Can we recognize the validity of different forms of baptism?

Generally Baptists find themselves unable to accept the validity of infant baptism. That is, they find it impossible to recognise it as valid New Testament baptism and therefore have no hesitation in baptizing as believers those who were 'baptized' as infants. Some Baptist writers in recent years, particularly in Britain, have urged that we should recognise its validity. Neville Clark has written: 'The re-baptism as believers of those who have received baptism in infancy constitutes a blow at the heart of the Christian faith.'²⁶ Similarly Alec Gilmore has urged: 'It is better to acknowledge that infant baptism, though partial in its expression of the truth and though involving serious theological distortion, is nevertheless baptism, and cannot therefore be followed by believers' baptism being administered to the same person.'²⁷ Beasley-Murray, however, finds himself unable to agree with such writers and comments that there is strong resistance to any such change of view. He pleads that others will recognise our sincerity in this matter and not interpret our attitude as the product of blind obscurantism.²⁸

On the other hand, Beasley-Murray urges Baptists not to think that differing views on baptism of necessity means perpetual alienation from other Churches as there are older Churches in Europe and newer Churches in Congo and China (he could now add India) which practise both infant and believers' baptism. Generally it is baptism that causes most hesitation to Baptists in considering union schemes. The difficulties usually voiced are: (i) that it is inconsistent for a Church to authorize two forms of baptism (this arises where a person baptized in infancy wishes to be baptized as a believer) and (ii) that infant baptism inevitably prevails, as where there is a choice being carried to the font tends to predominate over making one's own way to the

²⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 304.

²⁶ *Christian Baptism* (ed. A. Gilmore), London: Lutterworth, 1959, p. 325.

²⁷ *Baptism and Christian Unity*, London: Lutterworth 1966, p. 81. The whole chapter (5 'Baptism and Re-Baptism', pp. 75-89) is an interesting discussion of the practical problems that arise, including consideration of the Union Scheme for North India and Pakistan.

²⁸ *Op. cit.* pp. 391-392.

baptistery. With regard to (i) in the Plan of Church Union in North India²⁹ it is laid down that in the case of a conscientious change of view on baptism the minister consulted must confer with another minister of the opposite view from himself, that some remedy other than re-baptism should be sought, but that finally an appeal may be made to the bishop for pastoral advice and direction. It is appreciated that this is a brave compromise, but it hardly needs to be said that it would not satisfy most Baptists. It will be interesting to see how such problems are resolved in practice.

Beasley-Murray also urges open membership Baptist Churches in Britain not to insist on baptism for those previously baptized in infancy who wish to become members, and not to baptize unless there is a strong plea for it. Some Baptist Churches in Britain and in India have a separate list of members for those received from other Churches without believers' baptism. These are often called Associate Members.

It must be emphasised that the objection to the validity of infant baptism is that it is not the baptism of a believer. A separate question is whether baptisms by other modes than immersion are valid. I should say that many Baptists would regard those baptized as believers by other modes as validly baptized. However, one colleague of mine, who had been a Methodist, regards immersion so seriously as the only valid way that he will plunge the candidate under again if he was not immersed to the last hair the first time! Another colleague, with far more radical and ecumenical views, had a request for baptism by immersion from a sincere young man who had been baptized by sprinkling as a believer in a Methodist Church. I was interested that, having investigated the case thoroughly, my colleague was willing to baptize him by immersion, though I doubt if he meant to imply that the previous baptism was completely invalid. I should explain that these matters are left entirely to the conscience of the individual minister. However, in Britain Baptist Ministers are not willing to baptize again any who have been baptized by immersion as believers whether in a Baptist Church or any other. I understand that among the Southern Baptists of the U.S.A., where believers' baptism is practised on younger people, ministers are more ready to baptize again if the person asserts that he did not fully understand what he was doing the first time, i.e., it can be argued that it was not believers' baptism at all!

I have described the general Baptist position as I understand it, but there are Baptist groups (not necessarily called Baptist) who unfortunately do insist on the baptism of believers by immersion when a person wishes to join them whatever baptism has been given before. This applies to Strict Baptist groups in Britain and to the Bhakat Singh movement in India. One group of Baptist Churches in Britain insists that valid baptism must include the laying-on of hands accom-

²⁹ *Plan of Church Union in North India and Pakistan*, Madras: C.L.S., Appendix B, pp. 42-43.

panying it, i.e., they almost elevate it to the status of a sacrament in itself as happens with Confirmation.

There are some Pentecostalist groups (e.g. in the U.S.A. and North-East India) that insist on the formula 'in the name of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 19:5) at baptism rather than the Trinitarian formula of Matt. 28:19. They do not regard baptism in the name of the Trinity as valid, as the Apostles' practice (in Acts) was apparently to baptize in the name of Jesus alone. Probably both the New Testament formulas reflect current liturgical practice, and it is likely that the Trinitarian formula is the later one. However, both are scriptural! Baptists usually use the Trinitarian formula, as do other Churches, but it would not be in the Baptist tradition to insist that any particular form of words makes baptism either valid or invalid. Although orders of service books are used, particularly for special services, Baptists cherish their tradition of freedom to order any service without being obliged to follow any set form. Most Baptists would feel that the Trinitarian formula is the more suitable for Christian baptism, which is related, of course, to all members of the Trinity. On the other hand if the form of words used is 'in the name of the Lord Jesus', or even perhaps if no form of words is used at all Baptists would not consider a baptism invalid for these reasons alone.

Conclusion

The baptismal debate continues. Sometimes it has been conducted with regrettable controversy. Clearly Baptists in the ecumenical scene often appear to be particularly awkward. But in all sincerity we present an unashamed testimony to a deep conviction. At the end of his book Beasley-Murray puts a challenge:

Is a return to believers' baptism as the normal Christian baptism really inconceivable? That many members of Churches practising infant baptism are profoundly disturbed by it and would willingly accept a change is evident. There never has existed such dissatisfaction with the older views of baptism as today. Ministers and clergy of every Protestant denomination have expressed and still express their disquiet; and it is not without significance that support for criticisms made of infant baptism in this book has been drawn almost entirely from theologians of the great Churches and hardly at all from those sharing the writer's own persuasion. There is a willingness everywhere to think again concerning the Church's interpretation and practice of baptism.³⁰

Beasley-Murray mentions the Protestant denominations, but it was with great interest that I read in the Expository Times of November 1970 the words of a Franciscan, John Baptist Walker O. F. M.: 'It may well be that the children of Christian parents of the future will, after perhaps being dedicated to God in their infancy, only come to the immersion of baptism by their own free and responsible choice as they grow towards adulthood' (Vol. LXXXII, No. 2, p. 63).

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 389.