

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Leenhardt on Baptism.

AMONG the vast number of books and articles which have been published in the last few years on the question of Baptism is one which has received scant notice in this country. It is *Le Baptême Chrétien* by Franz J. Leenhardt,¹ professor in the University of Geneva. This is somewhat surprising when we consider that it is a development of arguments in a report presented at a Ministers' Conference at Geneva in 1934, and taken up again at a re-union of Swiss Theological Students, 1943. It was at this session that Karl Barth presented his *Die Kirchliche Lehre von der Taufe*, now so familiar to us through Dr. E. A. Payne's translation, *The Teaching of the Church regarding Baptism*.

In his book Leenhardt deals with the Baptism of John and the problem of the Sacrament, the Baptism of Jesus by John, Christian Baptism in the early Church and as explained by Paul, and he concludes with a chapter on the problem of Infant Baptism. From this survey of recent problems three points stand out as being of particular value to the Baptist.

I. Leenhardt sees in John's Baptism a form of Prophetic Symbolism,² which is scarcely surprising when we remember that John was regarded by our Lord as the last and greatest of the prophets of the Old Order. John was not content simply to preach; like his predecessors, he must do something to give force to his message.³ Leenhardt cites four characteristics of this method:

¹ 74 pp. Published by Delachaux & Niestlé S. A., Neuchatel and Paris.

² *op. cit.*, pp. 12ff. cf. W. F. Flemington, *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*, (1948), pp. 19-22. C. H. Dodd, ("The Life and Teaching of Jesus Christ" in T. W. Manson, *A Companion to the Bible*, p. 386), makes this likeness between prophetic symbolism and a sacrament, though his reference is in connection with the Lord's Supper. cf. H. W. Robinson, "Prophetic Symbolism" in *Old Testament Essays*, (1927).

³ Examples of the way in which the prophets used symbolic action in order to give force to their message can be seen in I Kings xx. 35-43, xxii. 11, Jer. xxvii. 2, Ezek. iv. 4, v. 1-4. Some writers (W. I. Wardle, *The History and Religion of Israel*, p. 177; Oesterley and Robinson, *Hebrew Religion*, pp. 75ff.) have likened this to sympathetic magic which was well-known among some of Israel's contemporaries, but there is a difference. In magic the aim is to control the circumstances by the performance of a certain ritual; with the prophets it was rather that they were so overcome by their message that they needed action as well as word to express it. In fact, the prophets were the people who opposed mere ritual and religiosity as a means of salvation (see H. H. Rowley, *The Re-discovery of the Old Testament*, p. 156.) and in their actions really failed to make a distinction between the word and the act. W. M. Clowe (*The Church and the Sacraments*, p. 69) says the prophets penetrated past the mere rite and past the mere symbol to the spiritual truth symbolised. Thus, for them, the act did not produce the result, but was a symbolic declaration of God's working and depended for its fulfilment upon God's faithfulness to the word proclaimed through His prophet.

- (a) it is symbolic.
- (b) it expresses the Divine Will.
- (c) it aims to give the Divine Will concrete expression.
- (d) it affirms the efficacy of the Word.

A moment's reflection enables us to see how clearly Believers' Baptism by immersion fulfils at least three of these conditions. *It is symbolic* in the sense that it bears some reality to the thing symbolised (cf. *Ezek. vi. 1-4, 11-12*). It is unquestioned that our baptism is linked with the sufferings of Christ⁴ and with our conversion,⁵ and therefore Believers' Baptism by immersion bears a close resemblance to Paul's words when he speaks of being buried with Christ in baptism and rising to newness of life⁶ (*Rom. vi. 1; 1 Cor. i. 13; Heb. vi. 4*).

It aims to give the Divine Will concrete expression in two ways :

- (a) it reinforces a man's announcement to the world of his conversion.
- (b) it reinforces the man's conviction as he sees himself going through the various stages of our Lord's Death and Resurrection.⁷

It affirms the efficacy of the Word because it holds together the preaching of the Word (resulting in conversion) and the act of Baptism,⁸ thereby preventing us from falling into the error of

⁴ see Flemington, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71, 90-91, 122f.; K. Barth, *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, pp. 16-18; O. Cullmann, *Baptism in the New Testament*, pp. 13-15, 19; A. M. Hunter (*The Work and Words of Jesus*, p. 96n.) shows how in Lk. xii. 50 and Mk. x. 38 Jesus uses the word "Baptism" to denote His Passion. The word is also used as a vivid metaphor for suffering in the Old Testament. (Pss xlii. 7, cxlv. 4f. and Isaiah xliii. 7).

⁵ Flemington, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49, says the ideas most frequently linked with baptism in the New Testament are those of "hearing the word" and "believing." (cf. pp. 110f., 116, and "An Approach to the Theology of Baptism" in *The Expository Times*, vol. LXII, 1950-51, p. 357.) Cullmann (*op. cit.* pp. 27-28) admits that Baptism and Confession of Faith go together in the New Testament (cf. Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 42) but says that they need not necessarily be the preconditions of baptism. He discusses the subject more fully in Chapter III. (cf. E. A. Payne, "Professor Oscar Cullmann on Baptism," in *The Baptist Quarterly*, vol. XIV, 1951, p. 57.)

⁶ see Flemington, "An Approach to the Theology of Baptism" in *The Expository Times*, vol. LXII (1950-51), p. 356.

⁷ Barth (*op. cit.* p. 9) says that as a man goes into the water and realises the threat to life involved, so also does he realise subsequently how he has been saved, and in this respect baptism by immersion is more symbolic than baptism by affusion.

⁸ see Flemington, *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*, pp. 49, 65, 109, 122f.; Barth, *op. cit.* pp. 19f. H. Cook (*What Baptists Stand For*, p. 100) says preaching must precede Baptism so that the candidate knows what it means; what is expressed and what is symbolised.

regarding them as two separate acts;⁹ infant baptism, on the contrary, separates them by ten to twenty years.

Concerning Leenhardt's second point it would appear at first sight that the upholders of infant baptism have the stronger position, for they agree that as Christ dies for all, so it is God's will that all should be saved; this is clearly expressed when every individual is baptised as a child.¹⁰ But it should be remembered that although infant baptism expresses the Divine Will it does not bring fulfilment, as Flemington himself admits,¹¹ and it is therefore deficient as regards Leenhardt's general understanding of it along the lines of prophetic symbolism. That it is God's will that all should be saved and that His Will should find a concrete expression in our life no one will doubt, but experience has taught us that baptism alone will not bring this about.

Thus in every respect it would appear that Believers' Baptism by immersion bears a close relation to the work of Christ on the Cross and in our hearts. This is not to say, however, that Leenhardt is championing the Baptist cause, for he sees baptism as more than a mere symbol. The number of Baptists today who see in baptism nothing more than a public profession of faith is declining, but there are still many who hesitate at the suggestion that in baptism "something happens". Leenhardt,¹² however, says baptism is not simply a spectacular method to make the preacher's word particularly clear; it is an expression of the Word of God which is both active and powerful.¹³ Consequently, although Leenhardt's work makes us grateful to him for, in some measure, championing our cause, it also makes us realise at least one of the gaps in our theology of baptism. If it is more than a public profession of faith, in what respects is it more?

II. Leenhardt sees baptism to be closely linked with repentance and the giving of the Spirit. He argues¹⁴ that because Jesus is

⁹ Flemington, (*op. cit.* p. 111), says no New Testament passage really separates the outward act and the inward significance. J. Denney (*The Death of Christ*, p. 185), says baptism and faith are "the outside and the inside of the same thing".

¹⁰ Flemington (*op. cit.*, p. 137), puts this forward as an argument in favour of infant baptism.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, p. 142. Cullmann, (*op. cit.*, pp. 66f.), says that Paul's objection to the pre-Christian Jewish administration of circumcision was that the recipients of it so often proved failures, and what he writes about this in Rom. ii, 25ff. fits in so well with what he says about Baptism in Rom. v. ff., and I Cor. x. 1ff., that one must conclude that the thought of Christian Baptism stands behind this chapter. Thus, Cullmann also recognises the need for response, though he goes on to add that where this response is not forthcoming it is not the fault of the *circumcision*, but of the *circumcised*.

¹² *op. cit.*, p. 19.

¹³ see Flemington, *op. cit.*, pp. 20, 61, 63, 79-81, 109, 136.

¹⁴ *op. cit.*, pp. 30ff.

Man, what He did involves us all, and therefore we can say that Pentecost accomplishes the Baptism of Jesus.¹⁵ *Acts ii. 38-39* interprets Pentecost and links it with repentance and baptism, so that baptism is the necessary accompaniment of repentance and the intermediary step between repentance and the giving of the Spirit. Each step, however, is quite distinct. There were two outstanding points about Christian Baptism as compared with the Baptism of John :

- (a) it was in the name of Jesus Christ which signified that Faith had already laid hold on the pardon of Jesus.
- (b) the candidate waited for the Spirit.

This is an understanding of baptism which is now frequently made by writers on the subject. Flemington¹⁶ strikes this note again and again in his interpretation of New Testament Baptism. Cullmann¹⁷ makes the same point and says that in the Early Church it seems to have been the idea that baptism was for the remission of sins and the laying on of hands was for the imparting of the Holy Spirit. Then he stresses that the two rites ought not to be separated. It is true that subsequently he separates faith and baptism,¹⁸ and that from a Baptist point of view he is to be criticised on these grounds,¹⁹ but that he makes this connection between the two acts cannot be denied. Cullmann, however, would put baptism at the beginning of a man's life so as to make it clear what God has done for him, and the question which inevitably arises where repentance, baptism and the giving of the Spirit all go together is why baptism is added to a faith that already exists. In other words, is baptism for Baptists nothing more than a mere appendage to conversion?

In reply to such a claim Leenhardt²⁰ would say that this view makes a false distinction between faith and rites; it is false, because it is contrary to history and psychology, where we learn that the inner life is only intelligible in so far as it comes out in every aspect of a man's being. Flemington,²¹ similarly, says that entry to the Kingdom was not through baptism as such but through the rite which lay behind it; baptism was the "kerugma" in

¹⁵ see Cullmann, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

¹⁶ *op. cit.*, pp. 60, 67-69, 109f., 122. cf. Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

¹⁷ *op. cit.*, pp. 10ff. cf. H. W. Robinson, *Baptist Principles*, pp. 13, 24.

¹⁸ *op. cit.*, pp. 47-48. Cullmann supports this division from the New Testament, (I Cor. x. 1ff.; Heb. vi. 6, x. 26; Rom. vi.), and says (pp. 27-28) that baptism and confession of faith only go together in the New Testament because of special circumstances. (cf. p. 50).

¹⁹ see Payne, *loc. cit.*, p. 59.

²⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 41.

²¹ *op. cit.*, p. 123.

action. Later,²² he describes it as the external counterpart of the inward attitude of repentance and faith. W. M. Clowe²³ says that only through faith has baptism power to seal the believers to Holiness, which is almost an echo of Brunner's claim that the Sacrament is the place where the union of the inward and the invisible with the outward and the visible is achieved by God Himself and is made to faith.²⁴ Citron²⁵ goes even further and gives primary importance to the conversion experience which he believes to be inseparably linked with the act of baptism; man only becomes aware of what has happened in his conversion when he passes through the waters of baptism. From the negative side, J. R. Nelson²⁶ says that baptism and the giving of the Spirit have been separated to the sorrow of the Church.

Thus we can see that in the linking together of baptism and the giving of the Spirit, Baptists have not only the New Testament, but also a number of modern theologians on their side. This is not to say, however, that all modern scholars take up the Baptist position in rejecting infant baptism. So we come to the third point of interest to us in Leenhardt's treatise.

III. In spite of all that has been said Leenhardt²⁷ still comes down on the side of infant baptism, though not without a plea for a reformation of it, since he considers that in its present form it is not without its misconceptions. In this respect he does not go so far as Brunner²⁸ who considers that the contemporary practice of infant baptism can hardly be regarded as being anything short of scandalous. Leenhardt, however, claims that as the child is unaware of the significance of the Sacrament as a symbolic action, that lack must be filled by those who accept the responsibility of administering the sacrament to it. They must subsequently make the child aware of what God has done for him and how this has already been symbolised on his behalf. Leenhardt admits that it is a deviation from the ordinary understanding of a sacrament which requires a conscious subject, but feels it is permissible *only* where the child is surrounded by Christians who are prepared to accept this responsibility.

Cullmann²⁹ is doubtful about Leenhardt's conception of adult

²² *op. cit.*, p. 124. He quotes P. T. Forsyth, who says it can be subjectively significant because it is objectively real.

²³ *op. cit.*, p. 111.

²⁴ see *The Divine Imperative*, p. 240.

²⁵ see *The New Birth*, pp. 132ff.

²⁶ see *The Realm of Redemption*, pp. 128f.

²⁷ *op. cit.*, p. 71-73.

²⁸ see *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 132.

²⁹ *op. cit.*, pp. 28-29.

baptism and infant baptism, but does nevertheless admit³⁰ that where a child is baptised in the New Testament and in true Church practice, the natural membership of a Christian family, or at least the possession of Christian parents, is presupposed, and 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. J. K. S. Reid,³¹ similarly, arguing in favour of infant baptism, has no hesitation in saying that infant baptism is the baptism of children of Christian parents and that it can only be rightly administered under certain conditions. Brunner³² makes it plain that this was the presupposition of the Reformation practice of baptism, and that all our ancient baptismal liturgies implied as the essential element the confessions of faith of the parents or witnesses of the baptism, and the vow to provide Christian instruction for the one being baptised. Such facts and statements lead us to agree with Leenhardt that there is undoubtedly a need for a reform of the doctrine.

The question which inevitably arises for the Baptist, however, in a day when Church Union is to the fore is whether, in a united Free Church, we would be willing to accept some method of reformed infant baptism along the lines which Leenhardt suggests. It will be obvious to all that such a reformed doctrine is a long way from any doctrine of infused grace; equally, it will appear to many to be a long way from Believers' Baptism as we have understood it. Nevertheless, is it possible for us to accept it as being a possible interpretation of baptism to be administered alongside the baptism of believers, or are we to stand firm and admit of no alternative whatever?

A. GILMORE.

Rev. E. P. Winter, 18, Bromfield Road, Redditch, who is engaged in research into the theory and practice of the Lord's Supper among Baptists up to the end of the 17th century would be grateful for information relating to our oldest churches.

WILLIAM CAREY:—Mr. J. T. Whitley draws our attention to information given about Carey in "The Registers of Moulton," Vol. 1, Parish Register Society, 1903.

³⁰ *op. cit.*, p. 51. He even dares to say (p. 36) that a child who is baptised and does not later accept Christ in faith is guilty of the unforgivable sin of the New Testament. (cf. pp. 40, 49).

³¹ "Theological Issues involved in Baptism," in *The Expository Times*, vol. LXI (1949-50) pp. 203-204. cf. "The Administration of Holy Baptism" in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. III (1950) pp. 173ff.

³² see *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 130.