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Gorham on Infant Baptism

BY THE RIGHT REV. J. R. S. TAYLOR, D.D.

A CENTURY has passed since the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council gave its judgment that the doctrine concerning Baptism held by the Reverend George Cornelius Gorham was not contrary or repugnant to the doctrines of the Church of England as expressed in its Articles, Formularies or Rubrics and required to be held by its ministers. Lord Langdale, in delivering judgment, said that the doctrine held by Gorham appeared to be as follows :

“ That Baptism is a Sacrament generally necessary to salvation, but that the grace of regeneration does not so necessarily accompany the act of Baptism that regeneration invariably takes place in Baptism ; that the grace may be granted before, in or after Baptism. That Baptism is an effectual sign of grace, by which God works invisibly in us, but only in such as worthily receive it—in them alone it has a wholesome effect ; and that without reference to the qualifications of the recipient it is not in itself an effectual sign of grace. That infants baptized and dying before actual sin are certainly saved ; but that in no case is regeneration in Baptism unconditional.”

I

Gorham became the storm-centre of a controversy that raged for many years, and the subject of that controversy is still a live issue, and to-day “ there is even more need for the Church of England to clarify her doctrine of Baptism than there was when this ecclesiastical cause célèbre was at its height ”. So writes the Rev. J. C. S. Nias in the Introduction to his book *Gorham and the Bishop of Exeter*¹. Those who share his sense of the importance of the subject will welcome his review of the events which led up to the Judicial Committee’s judgment, and of the repercussions from it ; they will admire the thoroughness with which he describes the lengthy and exacting examination to which Gorham was submitted by Bishop Phillpotts, and the fairmindedness with which he does justice to the arguments on both sides and tries to elucidate the meaning of ambiguous or confusing passages. Mr. Nias also deserves our gratitude for stating so fully the arguments put forward by counsel in the two legal trials, and the industry with which he has examined and summarized the mass of literature that the controversy evoked.

But the fulness of treatment in the early part of the work only serves by contrast to increase the disappointment which must be felt over the unexplained cause which so drastically curtailed the closing chapters. Only some extreme pressure can account for the sketchy and unconvincing character of the reconsideration of the controversy in ch. X, where merely two pages are given to the doctrine of F. D. Maurice, which the author promises in the Introduction to present “ as a screen against which the limitations of both the high church and

¹ Published for the Church Historical Society by the S.P.C.K. (1951, 17/6).

evangelical party doctrines may be seen more clearly"; whereas the brevity of the reference fails to make anything clear at all, least of all the real position of Maurice.

Still more regrettable and surprising is the omission of even a short summary of J. B. Mozley's work *The Baptismal Controversy*. In his Introduction Nias states that "the controversy may be said to have been wound up" by this book, which was published in 1862. But, though he devotes thirty pages to a discussion of the pamphlet warfare which followed the publication of the Judicial Committee's decision, Nias makes no further mention of Mozley or his book—a glaring omission which must damage his claim to be considered as a serious historian. By contrast, for instance, S. C. Carpenter in his history of the period in *Church and People* devotes a whole page to Mozley's book out of the ten pages in which he describes the Gorham case. This is what he writes :

"There were really two questions at issue, doctrinal and ecclesiastical or political : (1) Is the regeneration of all baptized infants an article of the faith? (2) Supposing it not to be that, does the Church of England impose the belief on all its ministers? James Mozley spent four years in the study of the whole question, and finally came to the conclusion that both questions must be answered in the negative. The doctrine has never been received as an article of the faith, that is, as read in or proved by Holy Scripture, and as constituting a condition of communion with others. That being so, it is not likely that the Church of England would impose it as a necessary belief. The statement made after the Baptism of every child that 'this child is now regenerate' and the statement in the Catechism to be repeated by the child that in Baptism he was 'made a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the Kingdom of heaven' belong to a class of statements which (quoting Mozley) 'are literal in form, but hypothetical in meaning. We find this as a known and established usage of language in these classes of formularies. . . . In the absence of any such assertion elsewhere in our formularies, an assertion pronounced over the child in a service, or put into the child's mouth in a Catechism, does not possess this force. The whole evidence viewed collectively appears to me conclusive in favour of the judgment of the Court of Appeal, viz. that our formularies do not impose the doctrine that infants are regenerate in baptism'.

"This (adds Carpenter) is a rather academic conclusion, but, if it is adopted, it appears that the whole agitation was, strictly speaking, unnecessary". This is a niggardly criticism on Carpenter's part. A rather academic conclusion! What else did he expect it to be? He might equally have written that the Privy Council's decision was "rather a judicial conclusion". After an Oxford Professor, who he admits had a "powerful mind", had been studying the subject for four years, his findings were likely to be academic, and all the more impressive to reasonable people on that account, particularly since Mozley had been a recognized leader of the Tractarian Movement for many years, and did not start his investigation with any bias towards the views of Gorham.

But to return to Mr. Nias, we find that as he read the documents of

the case he "developed an affection for Gorham and a sympathy for him in the trial he had to face", and he came to recognize that "there was something, perhaps a great deal, in what he had to say". And in both these reactions he has helped his readers to share. It is impossible not to recognize the severe ordeal to which Gorham was subjected in an examination, lasting more than fifty-one hours in all, in which he had to weigh every word that he uttered. Such a test demanded a high degree of vigilance, skill and endurance.

That examination provided all the data of the case. On Gorham's answers to the Bishop's questions were based most of the arguments of counsel on either side and the conclusions of the judges. By his words in these hours of trial Gorham would be justified or condemned. He adroitly recognized this before the hearing began and took accurate notes of the questions put to him, and also of his replies. The Bishop of Exeter's secretary did the same and the record of each session was mutually agreed and endorsed. These records were published in Gorham's book *The Efficacy of Baptism*, which formed the only evidence laid before the Judicial Committee. Consequently the chapter entitled 'The Examination' is the most important part of Mr. Nias's book, and it is for the fulness and carefulness of his presentation of it that we are most indebted to him. For on this evidence we are enabled to assess both the strength and the weakness of Gorham's doctrinal position.

II

Gorham was the defendant in the examination and so could not predict what line the Bishop would take: but he evidently hoped that one day's hearing would suffice. So on the first day he laid his cards on the table and revealed what he believed to be the strength of his case.

(i) He maintained that there could not be a dual theology of Baptism in the Church. The Credal acknowledgment of "one Baptism for the remission of sins" not only forbids re-baptism but implies the identity of the Sacrament, whether administered to adults or infants. The relation between Faith and Baptism expressed in the verse "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved", maintains the scriptural doctrine of Justification by Faith, of which Baptism is the sign and seal. In the New Testament it is clearly personal faith in God through Christ that is meant, and this is equally necessary for all—"he that disbelieveth shall be condemned".

(ii) He postulated the priority of the XXXIX Articles, as the explicit standard of doctrine of the Church of England, when there seemed to be some divergence in the liturgical language of the Prayer Book. So that the formularies are to be interpreted by the Articles, and not vice versa. And this view was upheld by the Judicial Committee. On this basis Gorham maintained that the Church clearly teaches in Articles XXV-XXIX that the Sacraments have a wholesome effect and operation only in those who receive the same "rightly and with faith." "When there is no worthy reception, there is no bestowment of grace."

(iii) He pleaded for that "just and favourable construction" to

be given to the language of our formularies which the Preface to the Prayer Book expects to be allowed in common equity to all human writings, "especially such as are set forth by authority." And he asserted a similar principle when he insisted that statements in our formularies must not be interpreted in isolation, but must be compared with other passages, so as to maintain a reasonable consistency.

A good instance of the "just and favourable construction" for which Gorham pleads is provided by Lord Langdale's summing up of Gorham's doctrine, which is printed at the beginning of this essay. Bishop Phillpotts complained in his letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury that the Judgment did not take into account what Gorham really said. It is true that some of the statements in Gorham's replies are not covered by the summary, but on the whole it is a just presentation of his general position.

III

Nevertheless there are weaknesses, and sometimes inconsistencies, in some of Gorham's statements, and it is important to take these into consideration.

(i) There is not sufficient insistence on the Ministry of the Word. Gorham could have strengthened his case considerably, if he had shown the close relation in the New Testament between the Sacraments and the Word. He maintains that faith is necessary to salvation, but he apparently fails to remind his questioner that "faith cometh of hearing and hearing by the word of Christ", and to point out that in every recorded case of Baptism in the New Testament the Gospel has been heard and received. So St. Paul puts a test question to the Galatians, and asks, "Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law or by the hearing of faith?"

(ii) Gorham postulates too much of "prevenient grace", to the extent of its effecting justifying faith in every infant that receives Baptism "worthily". He would have been wiser if he had followed the Catechism, and consistently held the attitude which he showed in one of his replies, as follows, "with regard to infants, the difficulty of their not being able to perform the condition of faith, is stated in the Catechism, and is resolved by the stipulation for its performance. There the difficulty is wisely left by the Church."

(iii) Gorham seems to lack that apprehension of the nature of sacramental religion which emphasizes the integration of body and soul, of mind and matter, of outward expression and inward impression. He deeply regretted, in one of his statements, that the simple use of the word "sacrament", as the outward and visible sign, had not been invariably adhered to in the Formularies of the Church of England. But he adds, "in fact, when the doctrine of the Reformers is carefully studied, there is seen to be no real theological confusion."

This is certainly true. And indeed, the teaching of the Reformers provides the surest interpretation for the understanding of the Formularies and Articles of the Church of England. For that reason this essay concludes with a summary of their teaching on the Sacraments, and on Baptism in particular.

IV

The Reformers' Doctrine of the Sacraments.

(i) Taking their stand on the Scriptures, the Reformers accepted the "two sacraments ordained by Christ our Lord in the Gospel" as having full dominical authority. Biblical criticism did not trouble them with historical uncertainties which "render precarious the reliance on the mere fact of Christ's appointment" (Quick). Yet their acceptance, while whole-hearted, was not uncritical. They realized and valued the interdependence of the inward and the outward, of the material and the spiritual, in the sacraments; but their emphasis was upon the word of Christ, which constituted the main distinction, for instance, between the authority of Baptism and that of Confirmation. It was His appointment that gave a unique place and importance to the two sacraments.

(ii) Again, their study of the New Testament taught them the vital connexion between the sacraments and the Word. It was the word of institution and the word of promise attached to each of the Gospel sacraments which gave them their special authority. But their relation to the Word was something wider and more fundamental. The Word is the Gospel of Christ, which is "the power of God unto salvation". The sacraments could only be instruments of salvation in so far as they were vitally related to the Word, declaratory of the Gospel, *verba visibilia*.

They believed in sacraments of the Gospel, not in a gospel of Sacraments. So the Word had first place, and alike in the Prayer Book, the Ordinal and the Articles the order is always the same—the Word and the Sacraments. Nevertheless they held the sacraments to be true and necessary means of grace, on account of their divine institution and their relation to the Gospel of grace.

The Reformers' Doctrine of Baptism.

(i) They gave full value to all passages of Scripture which were patient of a baptismal interpretation, e.g. 'born of water and of the Spirit', 'the washing of regeneration', etc. Hence they included in the scope of Baptism not only admission to the Church, but remission of sins, the resurrection life and the power of the indwelling Spirit. So Hooper writes, "I believe that baptism is the entry of the Church, a washing into a new birth, and a renewing of the Holy Ghost. Being thus newborn we should walk in newness of life."

(ii) They applied, to a surprising degree, terms which properly express the thing signified to the sign itself, e.g. Cranmer says, "as the water is called water of regeneration, or new birth, so it declareth unto us that through Christ we be born anew and begin a new life towards God." And Jewel, "Baptism is our regeneration or new birth, whereby we are born anew in Christ, and are made sons of God and heirs of the Kingdom of heaven: it is the sacrament of the remission of sins, and of that washing which we have in the blood of Christ." And Bradford, "In baptism is given unto us the Holy Ghost and pardon of our sins". It is also to be remembered that it was the 1552 Prayer Book which added the phrase in the Baptismal

Office, "seeing now . . . that this child is regenerate", and the thanksgiving, "that it hath pleased thee to regenerate this infant with thy Holy Spirit."

(iii) But they always used these phrases *sacramentally*, never attaching to sacraments any automatic action, as though they possessed grace in themselves. They consistently held that the sacramental effects of Baptism did not necessarily involve real effects.

So Grindal says, "In baptism men regard not greatly the water, but account themselves washed with the blood of Christ Wherefore to the faithful receivers you may say that the water of baptism is the blood of Christ." And Jewel, "In Baptism, as the one part of the holy mystery is Christ's blood, so is the other part the material water. Neither are these parts joined together in place, but in mystery : and therefore they be oftentimes severed, and the one is received without the other." Similarly Bullinger says, "Many receive the visible Sacraments, and yet are not partakers of the invisible grace which by faith only is received." And in answer to Cartwright, Whitgift writes, "You have learned that there is such a similitude between the signs and the thing signified that they are usually called by the names of those things whereof they be sacraments, as bread the Body of Christ and water Regeneration. It is a certain and true doctrine of all such as profess the Gospel that the outward signs of the sacrament do not contain in them grace, neither yet that the grace of God is of necessity tied unto them, but only that they be seals of God's promises, notes of Christianity, testimonies and effectual signs of the grace of God, and of our redemption in Christ Jesus."

(iv) The ways in which the Reformers maintained this distinction were two :

(a) First, by emphasizing the symbolic aspect of the sacrament. As Oliver Quick wrote, "the change from adult-baptism to infant-baptism as the normal practice of the Church should have involved a shifting of emphasis from the instrumental to the symbolic aspect of the sacrament."¹ To the Reformers Baptism was "a sign of Regeneration or new birth" (Article 27) : the Sacraments were "effectual signs of grace and of God's good will" (Article 25), but effectual as signs. So Whitgift wrote, "By the consent of all the Churches there is but one Baptism, wherewith it is sufficient once to be christened, seeing that Baptism once received doth endure for ever, as a perpetual sign of our adoption." And Becon says, "Baptism is a continual sign of the favour of God towards us, of the free remission of sins, of our reconciliation unto God for Christ's sake, and that we be by adoption the sons of God and heirs of everlasting glory." Hence Baptism declares the grace of God, and especially our redemption by the blood of Christ. It is also a seal of the promises of God in Christ, and a seal of the Christian covenant, which is necessary for the perfect donation of grace. So Jewel writes, "It is the covenant and promise and mercy of God which clotheth us with immortality, assureth our resurrection, by which we receive regeneration, forgiveness of sins, and salvation. His word declareth His love towards us ; and that word is sealed and made good by Baptism."

¹ *The Christian Sacraments*, p. 179.

Yet Baptism was not for the Reformers a bare sign ; as Bradford says, " there is not only a signification of a thing, but also a declaration of a gift, yea in a certain manner a giving also ; as baptism signifieth not only the cleansing of the conscience from sin by the merits of Christ's blood, but is also a very cleansing from sin."

(b) Secondly, by regarding this 'giving' in Infant Baptism as conditional and proleptic. As students of the New Testament, the Reformers recognized the necessity of repentance and faith, as " required of persons to be baptized ". So in the " Public Baptism of Infants " they put these conditions prominently in evidence in the questions immediately preceding the naming of the child ; and these questions were addressed to the child, not to the sponsors, as is clearly expressed in the rubric of the 1549 book, and is also implied in the question " Wilt thou be baptized in this faith ? " The anticipatory character of the rite is evidenced in the Baptismal service by the provision of sponsors, responsible for the upbringing of the child in the knowledge and faith of the Gospel, and by the preparation of the child for Confirmation by the Bishop. So Jeremy Taylor says, " Baptism and its effect may be separated, and do not always go in conjunction. The effect may be before, and therefore much rather may it be after its susception : the sacrament operating in the virtue of Christ, even as the Spirit shall move."

With this clear understanding of the symbolic and conditional aspects of Infant Baptism, the Reformers gave full value to the sacrament as an instrument by which God " doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our faith in Him." Hence Bishop Latimer writes, " Let us ever consider in what trouble or calamity whatsoever we be, let us remember that we be baptized." And similarly Bullinger says, " How often soever we have sinned in our lifetime, let us call into our remembrance the mystery of Holy Baptism, wherewith for the whole course of our life we are washed, that we might know, and not doubt, that our sins are forgiven us of the same God and our Lord—yea and by the blood of Christ, into whom by Baptism once we are grafted, that He might always work salvation in us, even till we be received out of misery into glory."