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REPENTANCE AND BAPTISM

THIS paper is not an examination of the doctrine of Repentance or the sacrament of Baptism except as light is thrown on these by the passage in Acts ii. 37-41, a passage which raises several interesting and practical problems in the sphere of Church history and evangelical preaching. Its points have arisen from a detailed study with the help mainly of the Moffatt commentary by Dr. Foakes-Jackson, who seems to regard the second chapter of Acts as not being an historical account of what actually happened at Pentecost. It is difficult to see how he justifies such a conclusion.

The passage deals with the close of Peter's address on the day of Pentecost and the subsequent addition of three thousand souls to the fellowship.

I. THE THREE THOUSAND SOULS

An increasing familiarity with statistics in our daily life has led to the practice of issuing reports of religious activities which include such statistics, and these find ready acceptance with the uncritical. But the value of such statistics lies entirely in their interpretation. The statement that "figures can be made to prove anything" is a fallacy. Figures can only prove the facts which they represent, but the uncritical mind is apt to select, deliberately or otherwise, such figures as suit its predetermined purpose. Figures are symbols, representing some reality, and in vital statistics they represent human beings—a fact recognised in Acts ii. 41, where we are told there were added to the Church that day "about three thousand *souls*". They were not impersonal units, but living persons, abounding in possibilities for good and evil.

At the end of last century in America a movement was begun for the evangelisation of the world within one generation. Its methods were based on the arithmetical principle that if each convert brought another, and that second brought a third, then within a generation the number of converts would equal the estimated population of the world. Without denying the duty of Christian witness, and without despising the vision and the

ideals in such a movement, it had little likelihood of success on a basis that overlooked the fundamental fact that the population of the world is not so many million abstract arithmetical units, but so many million souls, each one capable of conversion, it is true, but each one also capable of lapsing and perversion. Had the above principle been capable of mechanical application, the whole world would have been evangelised completely by the three thousand souls added in Acts ii. 41.

Commenting on this addition of the three thousand, Foakes-Jackson bluntly states, " These verses cannot be taken literally ", but—it may be for lack of space—his reasons are unconvincing. He admits that the large number is not so incredible as some have held, and suggests that they were mainly visitors who had come to the Feast—i.e. Jews. That there were Jews among the visitors no one would deny—that Jews formed the majority is also understandable—but surely some weight must be given to the earlier statement (ii. 9-11), that Parthians, Medes, Cretans, Arabians, proselytes from Rome, etc., heard the Gospel in their " own " tongues. Some further examination would have to be made of whether the writer of Acts would use such a phrase of Jews who had come to Pentecost from outside Palestine. Would even foreign birth cancel out the feeling of the pious Jew for his " own " tongue? It is a detail, and may be used in support of the theory that the three thousand were largely visitors. As Foakes-Jackson states, the number is not in itself excessive, though to see its credibility, an estimate of the normal population at that day would be useful. The influx of visitors for the annual convention at Keswick (population 4,600 in 1931) should give sufficient cause to refrain from a too hasty dismissal of the figure 3,000 as " impossible ".

The commentator continues, however, with the statement that it is incredible that a community of 3,000 was " regularly formed " in the city, and that Luke was simply giving a picture in idealistic terms of the wonderful sequel to the Pentecostal miracle and the speech of Peter. In the absence of a positive statement, it is doubtful whether the implication actually is that such a community was regularly formed, i.e. organised, though if we take into account the circumstances and the feelings of the crowd (ii. 6 states that the " sound " was heard in the city, and a " multitude " gathered) and compare it with experiences at revival meetings, it is not at all incredible. What is exceedingly

probable, however, is that the organisation was extremely "loose"—there was no prearranged "follow-up"—and for many the experience became an isolated one, so that the solid gains to the Church after a year or two could be numbered in hundreds rather than in thousands. Not all who make a profession of the Christian Faith are found faithful. There is nothing inherently improbable in the number 3,000, even if the numbers in the settled Church dropped, or if part of the 3,000 were visitors (not all of whom either would continue in the fellowship). It is certainly no argument for the statement that "these verses cannot be taken literally".

II. THE DOCTRINE OF REPENTANCE

A similar attitude is adopted in the comment on the word "Repent", where it is held that "repent" is probably "the equivalent of the Hebrew 'turn ye' to God, which is one of the keynotes of Joel's prophecy . . . the word 'turning' to mean repentance is not Biblical, though common in later Judaism".

Now Peter had told his hearers to repent (verse 38) and to "save themselves from this crooked generation" (verse 40), and no doubt there was in the minds of his audience the idea of repentance as a turning away from sin. The Latin rendering is "do penance", and is in line with Joel—"Turn ye with weeping, and with fasting, and with mourning"—as Foakes-Jackson says. But it must never be forgotten that repentance, whether in the Old or the New Testament, while it means a "turning away from", *ipso facto* implies a "turning towards" something else. Foakes-Jackson has already stated that the Greek means "change your minds", i.e. "have a new object in view".

It may be admitted that the quotation from Joel looks at one side of repentance only, but that is not a reason for limiting the scope of the word Peter uses. In actual fact, innumerable instances can be found to show that "turning" is used of "repentance" (in both its aspects) in the Old Testament, and not simply in later Judaism. To give only a few: it is found in Exodus, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel, referring to repenting from evil, and in Leviticus, Deuteronomy and Joshua meaning to turn from God to other gods. The New Testament abounds in similar examples of this use, while the

phrases "turn again", "turn to the Lord", and the past tense "turned" give clear proof that the association of "turning" with "repentance" is undoubtedly Biblical, unless it is claimed that "repentance" is used exclusively in the Latin sense of "do penance", in which case the example of Joel is a supporting text.

It is worthy of note at this point also that repentance is not mere sorrow for sin. The condition of forgiveness is not that the individual shall first express sorrow. It is that he forgives others who have wronged him. The words of Jesus are perfectly clear: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive them that sin against us." That is not to maintain that sorrow and repentance are unreal or valueless, but it is to stress the simplicity of the Gospel condition of forgiveness: "Forgive our sins as we forgive those that sin against us." A feeling of sorrow or repentance may come upon us when once we realise the magnitude of our own sins—it may be by being forgiven—but that is not a feeling that can or should be artificially created. The order is not (i) Feel sorrow for your own sins; (ii) Be forgiven by God; (iii) Forgive others. It is rather (i) Forgive others; which leads to (ii) being forgiven of God. (iii) Sorrow may arise as a result of that fuller light, and it will then lead to closer fellowship, greater gratitude, and deeper consecration and service. Repentance in its individual aspect is the changing of our habit of hating those who wrong us, to forgiving them by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That is turning to the God-ward way of life, and it leads to the state of forgiveness and inward peace.

III. THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

In verse 38 Peter associates Repentance with Baptism in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. Foakes-Jackson feels that this association raises several important questions.

(i) Did Peter maintain that baptism was indispensable on profession of faith? Or by the time Luke wrote had it become an accepted accompaniment?

(ii) How is it that water baptism is assumed to be the means by which the Spirit is bestowed?

(iii) Did this baptism differ from John the Baptist's?

(iv) How does this compare with Paul's doctrine?

(v) Did Jesus institute this sacrament, and insist on it as an absolute condition of discipleship ?

(vi) What is the significance of the formula ?

In studying the commentator's answers to the above questions, one is led to feel that he was unfortunate in his choice of words in framing the questions.

(i) In answering this problem, Foakes-Jackson maintains that Peter did not mean his words to be taken literally, because in the Gospels stress is laid on the fact that baptism on a large scale would only be administered where there was plenty of water. He refers to John iii. 23, where the fact of Aenon's having plenty of water is stated, but is *not* specially stressed. He relies more, however, on the fact that in Acts iii, after the healing of the lame man, Peter calls the hearers to repentance without insisting on baptism. What is overlooked is this : that in Acts ii. 37-8 Peter and the apostles are definitely asked for advice by the hearers, who desire some specific action, some sign which will testify to the genuineness and sincerity of their willingness to follow this new way of life. The sign suggested is the rite of baptism—a rite whose significance would be generally understood by all present. In Acts iii no such question is put to Peter. By the time Luke wrote, baptism had indeed become the accepted sign of open profession of the Christian Faith, but that is not the reason why it is recorded here.

(ii) The whole question of water baptism being the " means " by which the Spirit is bestowed has been clouded over by theorists from early days. It may be that the early Christians practised John's baptism and gave it a fuller interpretation, as some hold. It obviously had a fuller and somewhat different interpretation when Jesus Himself was baptised of John. But the New Testament view is that water baptism is not the " means " of the Spirit's bestowal, but a " sign and seal of our cleansing, of our engrafting into Christ, and of our membership of the household of faith ". Foakes-Jackson seems to raise a question which this text does not raise.

(iii) In dealing with the third question, it is not merely stated that this baptism differed from John's, but, without convincing evidence, that there was a " hotly debated controversy " between the Johannine and Christian baptism. This is based on the insistence in the Gospels on the superiority of Jesus to John the Baptist. Now, that there would be discussion there

is no doubt. That some would assume Jesus to be a superior John there is also no doubt. But in view of the known relations of Jesus and John the phrase ("hotly debated controversy") seems rather strong. Both Jesus and John were clear as to the bounds and the significance of John's baptism, as well as the greater significance of Christian baptism. After the resurrection, the fundamental difference between Christ and the Baptist must have been even more obvious.

(iv) In comparing this teaching with Paul's doctrine, Foakes-Jackson writes : " It is evident that the speech of Peter as given in this chapter . . . represents a far less spiritual and more primitive conception of baptism, namely, as a means for obtaining a miraculous gift of prophecy and tongues, rather than a cause of transformed character."

It may at once be granted that Peter's speech represents a primitive conception of baptism—but it is a primitive *Christian* conception. Experience on any mission field, and in many a home Church, will support the idea that some would-be followers of Christ treat the sacrament as a magical rite. No doubt some of the 3,000 did so, but we have no grounds for supposing that they all did so, nor that Peter and the apostles did so. Peter did not in this speech—even by his Old Testament quotations—hold out the gift of prophecy and tongues as the aim or reward of accepting the Christian Faith. He led his audience back beyond that day's outward signs to the Risen Christ. He did claim that the Spirit would be given, but while the particular work of the Spirit at Pentecost was the gift of tongues, Peter would never have suggested that the work of the Spirit was confined to gifts of prophecy and tongues. The hearers' reaction to the accusation that they had shared in the crucifixion of their Lord was : " What shall we do ? " Their need was for forgiveness, not for a gift of prophecy and tongues—except it be to tell forth and witness to all nations of the forgiving love of God. If that is primitive, it is primitive-Christian—not to be confused with the magical-powers-for-personal-use idea which is suggested as being opposed to the transformed character. Furthermore, baptism in itself is not the " cause " of transformed character. It is the sign of the beginning, or of the fact of transformation's having been begun. To claim it as the cause is to give the sacrament a magical efficacy nowhere claimed for it in the New Testament.

It is to be remembered here that the subject of the gift of tongues is not one that has died out. In the West Indies to-day, as in former days, in negro cults of African origin, when worshippers work themselves into a frenzy *in order to* get the power to prophesy and speak with tongues, the proof of their gift of tongues is that they are *unintelligible*, either to the frenzied devotee or to the hearers. Mystery is a sign of the divine presence, and unintelligible words supply the mystery, the speaker then being thought to have the "spirit" and the gift of tongues. (Prophecy comes more generally to the negro through "dreams".) This speaking with tongues is not to be compared to the gift of tongues at Pentecost, where we are told the tongues were intelligible to the foreigners whose native languages they represented.

(v) With reference to the question as to whether Jesus instituted baptism as a sacrament, it is true, as Foakes-Jackson says, that, apart from John iii. 26, baptism as instituted by Jesus rests mainly on Matt. xxviii. 19, and the fact that His disciples, according to the Fourth Gospel, practised it. Peter's words here imply that Matt. xxviii. 19 is a correct record, i.e. Christ commanded His disciples to baptise converts. That Peter should have carried out such a command is most probable, and there is sufficient evidence in the Gospels to show that Jesus, if He did not Himself baptise, authorised the sacrament by His approval, if not explicitly. The controversy in the later Christian centuries over the actual mode of baptism—sprinkling, dipping, or immersing, has often led to a minimising of the references to its occurrence and its approval in the Gospels. It may be said that the sacrament of the Lord's supper has a single warrant—"This do in remembrance of Me"—but the new covenant was so different from the old in outward celebration as well as inward content that there are frequent references to it—notably 1 Cor. xi. In baptism, however, it was not the outward celebration that was different, but only the inner significance. It is dangerous to build up theories on the argument from silence. What we do know is that the practice of the early Church is in substantial agreement with the command in Matt. xxviii. 19—and with this speech of Peter's at Pentecost.

(vi) The commentator finally poses the question of the formula and its significance, and proceeds to answer it by saying

there is no formula, and that the omission is clear evidence of the primitive character of Peter's utterance. He adds that except for Matt. xxviii. 19, baptism is always, in the New Testament, "in the name of Jesus". But verse 38 reads: "Let each of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. . . ." Here again it would seem as if the commentator has got hold of a fixed idea, which, if it cannot be read back into the text, is used as a ground for declaring the text to fall short, and therefore to prove Peter's address to be primitive in character. It is clear that the short formula "in the name of Jesus" has as much right to be called a formula as the trinitarian form, and from one point of view, the full knowledge of Christ as Son implies the Father and the Spirit. The proper conclusion to be drawn from the verse is that the early formula for baptism was simpler and shorter than the later trinitarian formula—which is what we would expect. The significance lies in the fact that the Name of Jesus is used—showing that Christian baptism is different from John's, even supporting the idea that Jesus authorised or instituted the sacrament, and that the new life is rooted and grounded in Christ. It is a significant comment that after the three thousand were baptised (verse 41), verse 42 says: "They devoted themselves to the instructions given by the apostles, and to fellowship, breaking bread and praying together."

IV. CONCLUSION

The whole doctrine of baptism, and its connection with repentance, is hedged around with difficulties, but the majority of these difficulties are caused by the reading back of later theories into the early records and the records of the earliest days of the Church. It is not that scholars intentionally do this, but more often that the scholar at his desk has forgotten, in his eagerness to clarify and systematise the doctrine, that the New Testament Church was a living thing, a growing fellowship, and that its writers and preachers lived in the busy world of men, giving their message, often no doubt with omissions, often with unimportant accretions according to modern ideas. But what kind of systematic doctrine could be erected on the basis of a few sermons from a modern pulpit? Even of the best of preachers? Would there not be omissions, things taken for granted, accretions, unrelated incidents, isolated texts and tentative explana-

tions of the Faith? Yet, the general impression would be of a living faith in a living Saviour. Even so in this passage we are not so to dissect it as if it were a carefully thought out essay on baptism and repentance. It must be set in its whole context, and the context suggests that the address was delivered in white-hot passion to seize the opportunity to press home the fact of the resurrection gospel to a crowd which had been attracted and held by the miracle of Pentecost. This was neither the time nor the place to enter into doctrinal niceties. Peter used words that would be understood by his hearers at the moment—the detailed instruction came later for those who made the great decision. Set in this context, the sermon lives and is a challenge, and, let us never forget, it got results.

Like some of the Pauline epistles, it seems at times that the story of the Acts does not fit in with Church life and doctrine as we know it in Britain. But then these records were not penned for a people such as we are. They were recorded primarily for a people with a Jewish, Mediterranean, and Middle East background—a background of Hebrew faith, Greek philosophy, and Roman law, plus a fringe of “mystery” cults. We in the West may claim to have made that background our own by education and study. But that background is not native to our people. More important, our reaction is not the same as the native reaction of Jewish or Middle-Eastern peoples, nor of the Latin races. Nor in the nature of things to-day is it the same as if we were hearing the Gospel for the first time. The result is that we too often look for philosophical and materialistic interpretations of passages that are purely spiritual and religious, and too often we twist the New Testament to fit in with what we know of the Western Church.

The Acts of the Apostles, like the Pauline epistles, should be studied alongside the records of modern mission fields, for there the New Testament religious situations are paralleled so exactly that the New Testament lives for the reader again. The request for direction in verse 37 on first hearing the story of the Resurrection is frequently met with on the mission field, and mass movements are found in India and elsewhere. It is not that the records are obscure, but that we have not found the situation which they depict.

It is a healthy sign in exegetical writings generally to-day that scholars are no longer dissecting verses for the sheer sake

of the exercise, but are striving to illuminate the meaning of whole passages of scripture, and thereby making the Bible a living Book, the witness to a living faith.

To stress again the connection of Peter's address with the Gospel of Jesus : the test of the sincerity of repentance is the willingness to forgive others, and that is the condition of being forgiven of God. Baptism is the sign of profession of the new life, and a means of grace to continue that new life in Christ.

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