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Baptism and the Word¹

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IN THE New Testament, although there is excellent evidence for the baptism of the children of believing parents, the norm is undoubtedly adult baptism. Therefore, it will be our purpose, first of all, to consider the nature of the sacrament of baptism in general and particularly as related to the baptism of adult persons. Then we shall take up some of the special questions that concern the baptism of infants.

The sacrament of baptism is of dominical origin and definitely expresses the mind and the purpose of Jesus Christ. Christian baptism goes back to the beginnings of Christianity. Even before the written New Testament, this sacrament had been given a fundamental place. This is evident in the practice of the whole New Testament Church. The Acts of the Apostles and the letters of St. Paul testify to the common doctrine and practice of the Church. There was "One Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. 4:5). The question of the institution of Christian baptism is one that must be decided, not on any narrow, literal basis, with reference to a few isolated or disputed texts, but rather by interpreting the mind of Christ as reflected in the New Testament. When this is done, it becomes plain that the Church did not invent baptism. Christ himself instituted the ordinance and in administering baptism the Church only obeys the command of her Lord. There are of course excellent grounds for seeing the formal institution of the sacrament in Christ's express command to his disciples after his resurrection and before his ascension (Matt. 28:19f.). In the tradition of the Church there are in fact few sayings better authenticated than this. Quite apart, however, from such evidence, Christian baptism is grounded in the Person and Work of Christ. What he was, what he taught, and what he did are the facts that determine and shape the sacrament of baptism and give it significance.

In the sacrament use is made of sensible signs, that is, signs that appeal to our senses. There are five bodily faculties by which sensation is roused—sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. To borrow the analogy from Bunyan's book, *The Holy War*, the town of Mansoul may be entered through any one of five gates: Eye-gate, Ear-gate, Nose-gate, Mouth-gate, and Feel-gate.² It is to some of these senses that baptism makes its appeal. In the sacrament, water, a tangible and visible thing, is used as a symbol of the spiritual and unseen. Or perhaps it is more correct to say that there is action in the sacra-

1. This paper was first presented at an "Ecumenical Dialogue," held in Montreal on 4 January 1962. Other papers read on this occasion will be published in future issues of the *Journal*.

2. Cf. G. Offor (ed.), *The Works of John Bunyan* (3 vols., Glasgow: Blackie, 1859), Vol. III, p. 256

ment and so there is dramatic symbolism. The person baptized is either immersed in water or water is poured or sprinkled upon him "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost." By this piece of dramatic symbolism certain things are accomplished.

First of all, Christ and the benefits of his gospel are exhibited or represented—that is to say, re-presented or presented over and over again. A sacrament is an acted parable or a pictorial sermon. What the illustrations are to a book, that the sacraments are to the verbal teaching of the Word of God. Calvin notes that "Augustine calls a sacrament 'a visible word,' because it represents the promises of God as in a picture, and places them in our view in a graphic bodily form."³ If we are asked how much of the gospel of Christ is presented or proclaimed in the sacrament of baptism, the answer must be that it is the whole gospel that is re-presented. A Scottish theologian used to speak of the sacraments as "forms into which we may put as much of the gospel as they will carry." And he added that "St. Paul, for his part, practically puts the whole of his gospel into each."⁴ We may be apt to say that the gospel is compressed into a very brief form, but we have to admit that no essential part is lacking.

If we are pressed to give a detailed account of the gospel presented in the sacrament of baptism, we reply that it is the same gospel as is proclaimed in such key New Testament verses as "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:19); "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8); "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). The sacrament of baptism thus proclaims the good news that man through Christ is a new creature, truly feeling the efficacy of Christ's death in the mortification of his flesh and the efficacy of Christ's resurrection in the quickening of the Spirit.

It is not difficult to see that the drama enacted in the sacrament of baptism perfectly represents these truths. St. Paul speaks of baptism as a burial with Christ into death and a rising again with him from the grave. The descent into the water and then the emergence from it symbolize our dying to sin and our rising again to a new life in Christ. Another New Testament analogy is that of washing with water. This analogy has the advantage of having been inherited from the Old Testament, where it appears in such sayings as, "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean" (Ezek. 36:25). Possibly the most central of all the New Testament references is that of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It may not be amiss to stress that these—the dying and rising with Christ, the cleansing, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit—are not three separate realities, but aspects of the same reality. As D. M. Baillie has pointed out, "They are all aspects of the *newness*, the *renewal*, of which baptism speaks

3. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, xiv. 6. Cf. Augustine, *Tract. in Ioan.* 80, 3; *Contra Faustum*, xix. 16.

4. James Denney, *The Death of Christ* (rev. ed., London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911), p. 98.

sacramentally to us; a new life, a new and clean conscience, a fresh start, a new heart, a new spirit."⁵

Secondly, in the sacrament of baptism Christ and the blessings of the gospel are sealed to believers. The seal is a metaphor derived from legal contracts. It is attached to a written promise or engagement in order to give legal validity. Christ gave the sacraments to seal and confirm the truth that had already been proclaimed. It is for this reason that the sacraments have sometimes been called "sealing ordinances." Robert Bruce, preaching in St. Giles', Edinburgh, in 1589, said: "The Sacrament assures you of no other truth than that contained within the Word. Nevertheless, because it is a seal annexed to the Word it persuades you better of its truth, for the more the outward senses are awakened, the more is the inward heart and mind persuaded to believe."⁶ Karl Barth expresses the same truth in these words: "In baptism Jesus Christ seals the letter He has written in His Person and with His work and which we by faith in Him have already received."⁷

Thirdly, in the sacrament of baptism Christ and the benefits of the gospel are applied to believers. The sacrament is actually a means by which Christ is delivered. It is not merely a sign or symbol but an effectual instrument of promoting our spiritual nourishment and growth in grace. Robert Bruce uses the illustration of the king's picture. At the sight of the king's picture, the king will come into our mind. If that were all that a sacrament does, then any picture would be a sacrament. But the sacrament delivers the thing that it signifies to the soul and the heart. No picture can do this. No picture of the king can deliver the king to us. But God by the ministry of the Holy Spirit uses the means of the sacraments to deliver his Son Jesus Christ to us. To quote again from Bruce: "As the Word of the Gospel is a mighty and potent instrument for our everlasting salvation, so the Sacrament is a potent instrument appointed by God to deliver to us Christ Jesus for our everlasting salvation."⁸

The Word is essential to the sacrament of baptism. A sacrament consists of the Word and the external sign. The external sign by itself cannot be a sacrament. The action of the sign must be understood if it is to have meaning and effect for the participants. There must be not only the external sign with its appeal to the bodily senses, but also an accompanying understanding and a resulting faith. Divorced from the Word, the sign is only empty and delusive and not a true sacrament. It may be stressed that while the Word can be preached apart from the sacraments, the sacraments cannot be administered apart from the Word. Many theologians may be quoted on this theme. Augustine said: "Let the word be added to the element, and it will

5. D. M. Baillie, *The Theology of the Sacraments* (New York: Scribner, 1957), p. 79.

6. Robert Bruce, *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper* (ed. by T. F. Torrance, London: James Clarke, 1958), p. 64.

7. Karl Barth, *The Teaching of the Church regarding Baptism* (London: SCM Press, 1948), p. 29.

8. *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, p. 44.

become a sacrament. For whence can there be so much virtue in water as to touch the body and cleanse the heart, unless by the agency of the word, and this not because it is said, but because it is believed?"⁹ Calvin was also most anxious to guard the meaning associated with the phrase, "the word": "By the word we ought to understand not one which, muttered without meaning and without faith, by its sound merely, as by a magical incantation, has the effect of consecrating the element, but one which, preached, makes us understand what the visible sign means."¹⁰ Barth quotes with approval Luther's statements that baptism is "God's Word in water"; and that "without the Word of God the water is simple water, and not baptism; but with the Word of God it is baptism."¹¹

The efficacy of baptism is dependent upon the working of the Holy Spirit in them that by faith receive the sacrament. If we are asked how the sacraments become effectual means of salvation, we give this answer: "The sacraments become effectual means of salvation, not from any virtue in them, or in him that doth administer them; but only by the blessing of Christ, and the working of His Spirit in them that by faith receive them."¹² It is on this basis that a distinction should be made between "the principal efficient deliverer" and "the instrumental efficient deliverer." Robert Bruce puts it thus:

Strictly speaking no one has power to deliver Christ but God the Father, or He Himself. No one has power to deliver the Mediator, but His own Spirit. Nevertheless, it has pleased God to use some instruments and means by which He would deliver Christ Jesus to us. The means are these: the ministry of the Word, and the ministry of the Sacraments; and because He uses these as means to deliver Christ, they are said to deliver Him. But here you have to distinguish between the principal efficient deliverer, and the instrumental efficient deliverer, which is the Word and Sacraments.¹³

It may be noted that we have implied that the sacrament of baptism is to be received by faith. The sacrament can benefit only believers. To assert the necessity of faith, however, is not to make baptism subject to human frailty. The point is that faith itself is a gift of God. This faith is given by God when, where, and to whom he will. Faith even without the sacrament is efficacious. The reverse, however, is not true. The sacrament is not efficacious without faith.

While we stress the necessity of faith on the part of those who receive baptism, the primary emphasis must be on the fact that baptism is God's act. Our real and only hope of salvation is in what God has done and is doing in Christ. To see these truths in their proper relation is to see the real power of the sacrament. To quote Barth again: "But the power of baptism

9. *Tract. in Ioan.* 80, 3 (as abridged by Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, xiv. 4).

10. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV, xiv. 4.

11. Luther, *Larger Catechism and Shorter Catechism*, quoted by Barth, *The Teaching of the Church regarding Baptism*, pp. 18, 20.

12. *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, answer no. 91.

13. *The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, p. 45.

really lies precisely here—that it shows like a clear mirror that the Church and those baptized within her are not left alone with their own faith, are not dependent on themselves, but that faith has its ground and essence in the objective reality of the divine covenant of grace.”¹⁴ Baptism is God’s sign and seal. It is not the work of the person who is baptized and it is not the work of the person who administers the sacrament. It is God’s sign given in Christ through his Church. Therein lies its validity and its power. Man may contradict God’s sign, but the sign is still there. Evil men cannot divest themselves of their Christian baptism. As Barth pointed out during the Second World War, Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini all stood under the sign. The sign avails nothing if it is not apprehended and taken hold of by faith, but it is still there. It never ceases to be a sign both of warning and of comfort. And wherever baptism has been apprehended by faith it has worked. There have been not a few who in times of confusion and doubt have been restored and strengthened in their Christian life by the assurance of God’s promises given to them in the knowledge that they have been baptized.

The person baptized is engaged to confess Christ and to be his faithful follower. He is not only made sure of the gospel with divine certainty, but he is placed under obligation by divine authority. This too has been stated very emphatically by Barth: “He has received a Lord. That is the second thing that is said to the candidate in baptism—again by the Baptizer, Jesus Christ Himself—and said as no other but He finally can say it—with divine authority, so that he has no further ground or pretext for disobedience.”¹⁵

Baptism is the rite of reception into the visible Church. The Church has always regarded the baptism of adult persons as fulfilling all that is necessary with regard to qualification for full church membership. While baptism is the rite of initiation into the visible Church, it signifies something that is even deeper and more important, namely that the person baptized is already Christ’s. A helpful illustration may be found in the coronation of kings. Kings are not made kings by being crowned; they are crowned because they are already kings. In the same way a person is not made a Christian by baptism; he is baptized because he is a Christian.

To stress baptism as the door of entrance to the Church is to be reminded that this sacrament is to be understood within the framework of the Church. While baptism has significance for the individual person as such, it has even greater significance for him in his relation to his fellow Christians in the fellowship of the Church. This is why in principle baptism can only be celebrated within the framework of the public worship of God and not as a private act or family festival.

The sacrament of baptism is not absolutely necessary to salvation. The operations of the covenant of the grace of God are not in any sense dependent on the sign which seals it. God has not bound himself to the

14. Barth, *The Teaching of the Church regarding Baptism*, p. 21.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

sacrament so as not to be able to do otherwise without the sacrament. Baptism cannot be neglected without sin, but the sin is his who neglects to seek or to confer the sacrament. Barth has given characteristic expression to these truths:

The power of Jesus Christ, which is the only power in baptism, is not dependent upon the carrying out of baptism. Baptism has the necessity of a command which cannot fail to be heard (*necessitas praecepti*). It has not the necessity of an indispensable medium (*necessitas mediū*). The free word and work of Christ can make use of other means. That the Church is commanded to use this means cannot signify that Jesus Christ Himself is limited to it. The domain of the divine covenant of grace is larger than the domain of the Church, Christ's *regnum* wider than His *ecclesia*. The rule for us is that outside the Church there is no salvation, but the Lord of the Church is not limited thereto.¹⁶

Thus far we have assumed that the person baptized is an adult or at any rate not an infant. We may now consider the meaning of the sacrament in respect to the baptism of infants. There are good reasons for asserting that infant baptism is compatible with the gospel as proclaimed or represented in the sacrament of baptism when administered to adult persons.

Infant baptism is in harmony with the teaching that this sacrament is the rite of admission into the visible Church. If baptism is "the door of entrance to the Church," then the determinative question must be: "Are the children of Christians to be regarded as having a place within the Church of Christ or are they outsiders?" To answer that children have no place within Christ's Church is to put ourselves in a ridiculous position. It is to deny that there is such a thing as the Christianity of childhood.

What is implied in infant baptism is that Christian childhood, like Christian manhood or Christian womanhood, is part of God's plan for human life. The Holy Scriptures encourage us to believe that the children of believing parents are to be numbered among the people of God. The gospel writers tell how the Lord Jesus Christ with kindly words and gestures received little children who were brought to him, thereby assuring us that he will embrace our children within the arms of his love and protection. In the Acts of the Apostles (2:38f.) it is recorded that St. Peter said: "the promise is unto you, and to your children." The sacrament of baptism, when administered to infant children, is the recognition of their birthright into the household of faith. In other words, it is not by baptism that little children are made Christ's inheritance; it is because they are Christ's inheritance that they are baptized.

Infant baptism expresses with special clearness the prevenient love of God. Indeed, the Swedish theologian, Aulén, has described baptism as "the sacrament of prevenient love."¹⁷ The initiative in salvation is with God. We love him because he first loved us. He acted to save us long before we were

16. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

17. G. Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1948), p. 379.

able to do anything for ourselves. God commendeth his love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. He loved us with an everlasting love long before we were able to love him. It is this same glorious truth that is presented in the sacrament. Infant baptism illustrates the truth that God cares for us by anticipation, meeting us on the very threshold of life. When we are helpless in our opening days, when we would perish but for the love of those who love us, then does the love of heaven stoop down to us and in this sacrament bestow its seal. Infant baptism thus enshrines the fact that by God's love we are born into the Church which is full of his presence. It is a certificate given to each of us of a divine purpose to save us and to bless us—a purpose thus announced long before we are able to appreciate its significance.

The difficulty involved in the so-called "lack of faith" on the part of infant children at the time of baptism is removed when we understand that the efficacy of baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered. In the case of little children it is foolish to expect anything more than a nascent or immature faith at the actual time of baptism. On the other hand, it is quite reasonable to expect, if the child is brought up in Christian nurture, that this nascent faith will become increasingly mature as the child reaches years of understanding and discretion. As that time comes, the blessings symbolized in the sacrament will also come. In other words, God's promises so vividly symbolized in the sacrament of baptism, like the other promises he has made in his Word, may be responded to and enjoyed at some time—and at many times—subsequent to the time they are first revealed to us. The principle may be stressed that the Christian should look back with understanding to his baptism in infancy and by faith use it as a means of grace. Incidentally, this is one reason why the sacrament of baptism is not repeated. The glory of baptism is its "once-for-all-ness." The sign is given only once in the life of the individual person, but its efficacy is expected to continue all the days of his life, through faith and repentance.

Infant baptism presumes the participation of Christian parents or other sponsors and also the wider fellowship of the Church. We have already stressed the need both of understanding and of administering baptism within the fellowship of the Church. Wherever Christians have become individualistic and have failed to give expression to the solidarity and social nature of the Church, the true meaning of infant baptism has been obscured. Infant baptism implies not only that the child will be brought up by believing parents in a Christian home but also in the Christian environment of the Church. Surely the grace of God cannot more effectively reach a child than through a mother's loving care or a father's example, when they are believing followers of Jesus Christ and when their influence is upheld and strengthened by the Church. The ideal of Christian nurture is that the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise. The same ideal finds expression in baptism when the sacrament is administered to infant children.