

The Church of Scotland on Baptism

Comments upon the *Interim Report of the Special Commission on Baptism* (Church of Scotland Offices, 121, George Street, Edinburgh, 2. Price 2s.).

"I THINK we shall avoid much disquietude," wrote F. J. A. Hort to a friend, "by laying it down as a preliminary axiom that we must not expect ever to get to the bottom of the meaning of baptism." Were Hort alive today, however, he would at least have little reason to be dissatisfied with the amount of attention now being paid to this subject, for not since the 16th and 17th centuries has Baptism been examined with such thoroughness as during the last few decades. As a result, much material for a fresh judgment is being accumulated, and it may be helpful to summarize briefly the trend of recent opinion as outlined by the German scholar, Joachim Jeremias. Up till the early 1920s, Jeremias says, it was a common opinion amongst scholars that Infant Baptism is not mentioned in the New Testament, and therefore was presumably not known to the Church of that day. From 1927 onwards, this opinion has been increasingly challenged on the basis of evidence drawn from non-Christian sources, and especially from the Jewish practice of proselyte baptism. Finally, the relevant New Testament passages have been studied afresh in the light of the latest developments in Biblical criticism. The conclusion (we are told) is that our picture of the New Testament position must now be revised, and we must regard Infant Baptism as well-established in the thought and practice of the Early Church.

This is a development of opinion which merits the fullest scrutiny on the part of Baptists. As Jeremias has said, it has hitherto been widely accepted that, whatever the later practice of the Christian Church came to be, the New Testament at least could not be cited in favour of Infant Baptism. Even Paedo-baptists admitted as much. To quote a leading Congregationalist: "The New Testament affords no positive and indisputable evidence that children were baptized in the Apostolic Age. The justification of Infant Baptism is ultimately theological rather than historical."¹

¹ N. Micklem, *Christian Worship*, p. 248.

But those words were written twenty years ago, and it is clear that they would not be allowed to pass unchallenged today. It is therefore with special interest that one takes up the Interim Report on Baptism which has recently been prepared by a Special Commission of the Church of Scotland. The Committee's report consists of 54 closely printed pages, and is as remarkable for the spirit in which it is written as for the number and variety of the issues with which it deals. It forms what I can only call a kind of baptismal manifesto. Indeed, its tone suggests that the authors regard its contents as almost in the nature of a revelation. The Report is not likely to appeal to Baptists in that light; but we must at least pay tribute to the notable industry and zest with which the members of the Scottish Commission have thus far discharged their task. We are indebted to them for having made unmistakably plain the crucial importance of the issues which they have raised. The Christological significance of Baptism, in particular, has never been more powerfully presented, and, amongst much other important matter, this deserves the closest attention.

The character of the Report makes it impossible to do more within the compass of a short review than comment upon some outstanding features. At the outset, Baptists should notice that the Report quite frankly attempts to discredit Believers' Baptism—or rather that interpretation of Believers' Baptism which the authors think is implied by that term. (That their interpretation is erroneous will be obvious at once to Baptists, who do not find the same difficulty in distinguishing between Believers' Baptism and Adult Baptism as this Report does. But that is by the way.) Thus we read: "Those who adhere to 'believers' Baptism,' as it is called, baptising adults only, definitely exclude infant Baptism, thus laying down a law, where the New Testament lays down no law, fixing the age of Baptism. It is certainly wrong to limit Baptism to adult age where the New Testament does not do so, particularly since the very nature of its whole teaching points in the opposite direction" (p. 19). Again: "There is not a word in the New Testament about so-called 'believers' Baptism' . . . the idea of 'believers' Baptism' exclusive of infants is entirely modern, bound up with the Renaissance idea of human individualism and autonomy, and representing a radical divergence from the Biblical teaching about the nature of man" (p. 20). Once more: "The Word of God does not fix the age of Baptism, nor delimit precisely the operation of the Spirit. Therefore to systematise the actions of Christ in Baptism according to some rational pattern of our own . . . by requiring the priority in time of faith to Baptism . . . is to do wrong. Such systematisation is an attempt to control the Holy Spirit" (p. 52). (One is tempted at this point to ask whether, on the authors' presuppositions, it is not equally wrong to make a practice of exhorting parents to bring

their infants to Baptism, lest that too should be "systematizing" the actions of Christ).

In marked contrast to this brusque dismissal of Believers' Baptism are the claims made in the Report on behalf of Infant Baptism. The authors state roundly: "The whole of the Early Church was unanimous about infant Baptism for centuries" (p. 20). The only support offered for this claim, apart from passing references to Tertullian and Origen, is the further statement that "for 400 years at least there was no dispute about infant Baptism in the Church" (*ib.*) Of Tertullian, it is noted that he subsequently retracted the suggestion which he once made to depart from the practice of Infant Baptism (although in fact the evidence for Tertullian's so-called retraction is really very slight); while Origen (whose work is strangely allotted to the second century) is credited with having said that "infant Baptism had been practised in his family from the very beginning of the Christian Church" (*ib.*). (We ought surely to have been given the reference for this remarkable statement). In making these assertions the authors plainly attach no importance to the fact that neither the description of the rite of Baptism in Justin Martyr, nor the Catechetical Lectures of Cyril of Jerusalem, nor—still more significantly—the treatise by Gregory of Nyssa "On the early deaths of Infants," give any hint of the existence of Infant Baptism as a regular practice in the Church of their day. Further, the Report apparently regards it as quite irrelevant that such sons of devout Christian mothers as Basil of Caesarea and Augustine of Hippo were not baptized as infants. The authors are content to declare roundly: "The unanimous view of the Ancient Catholic Church predisposes us to regard infant Baptism as the unchallenged practice of the Christian Church from the very beginning" (p. 20).

Bearing in mind this admission (which reads somewhat strangely in view of the expressed intention of the authors to let the Scriptures speak for themselves—*vide* page 4), it is instructive to turn to those sections of the Report where the New Testament evidence is examined in detail. A discussion of this is out of the question here, and must be left to the New Testament exegetes. Yet even a reader who welcomes the more constructive approach which is characteristic of much modern biblical scholarship, may well wonder whether it can legitimately be held to justify quite such a wholesale revaluation of the biblical material on Baptism as is offered here. For, on the strength of the liturgical principles referred to in the Introduction, we are invited to believe that, in the case of all the usual debatable passages—the Blessing of the Children, the Baptism of Households, the Relation of Baptism to Circumcision, not to speak of any others—the case for Infant Baptism must now be regarded as finally proved. Even such

references to children as are found in 1 *John* ii. 1 and ii. 18 are pressed into the service of this new exegesis! Ultimately, the authors conclude: "Not only does the New Testament bear clear and widespread traces of infant Baptism throughout its pages, but it reveals a doctrine of Baptism which requires the Church to baptize its children" (p. 29). This is carrying the war into the enemy's camp with a vengeance! But the dogmatic tone of such language makes one wonder whether in fact the authors are quite as convinced of the validity of their arguments as they would have us believe. Is it possible that the contemporary situation in Scottish parishes has anything to do with it? It would be revealing to know what response the Commission gets to its request that the Presbyteries shall study the Report in outline, and give their findings.

A particularly notable feature of the Report is its failure to distinguish between the language appropriate to the Baptism of Believers and that used of infant baptism. Hitherto, many Paedobaptists have recognized the necessity of some such distinction. For example, C. F. D. Moule: "It is disingenuous (or, at best, ignorant) to transfer to Infant Baptism a weight of doctrine and a wealth of promises which, in the New Testament, are associated only with a responsible adult experience."² But the authors of this Report commonly subsume the Baptism of infants under that of their elders, on the assumption that all the members of a Christian household are included within the covenantal relationship which God has established through Christ. They refer, it is true, to the need for repentance and faith in connection with Baptism, and acknowledge that, in the New Testament period, "Adult converts were of course always baptized on the profession of their faith in Jesus as Lord" (p. 20). They say: "*Christian Baptism* is thus neither ritual purification, nor *ex opere operato* ceremony, but a *divine ordinance involving the proclamation of the Word of God and the obedience of faith in which the baptized are saved by the power of Christ's resurrection from the dead*" (p. 13). Again: "Apart from repentance and faith *Christian Baptism* is unthinkable" (p. 49). Yet their emphasis falls throughout on the corporate rather than the individual aspect of Baptism. Thus: "The *Christian Sacrament* of Baptism properly dates from the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the Church at Pentecost" (p. 10). Again: The Body of Christ in the New Testament is "the new humanity which was born of the Spirit in the midst of, and out of, our sinful humanity. . . . That crucified and risen Body of Christ is the Body into which the Church is incorporated in Baptism, so that it becomes through the Spirit one with the Body of Christ" (p. 30). In fact, what the authors are chiefly interested in is clearly not the faith of a candidate prior to Baptism, but his growth in grace within the Christian

² *Theology*, Nov. 1945.

Church afterwards. Of course, the notion that the faith of the Church actively supports that of the candidate is not new. It has long been a stock argument in defence of Infant Baptism. (Compare the essay of Dr. Micklem already quoted in which he says: "Baptism has no efficacy apart from faith. In infant Baptism the faith is that of the Church, not of the child"). What is new in this Report is the extraordinary stress laid upon the act of Baptism *per se*, introducing the candidate as it does into the Church as the Body of Christ, and so into the living presence and power of Jesus Christ, who is active to redeem and regenerate His people. Compared with this tremendous fact, it seems that the personal attitude of those who are baptized pales into insignificance. Thus the Report: "Though Baptism calls for our personal response, it is not the Sacrament of our repentance, nor of our faith, but of God's adoption and His promise of the Spirit. In Baptism it is He who adds us to the Church which is the Body of Christ. In the New Covenant infants who are baptised learn to call on the Name of God because they have been baptised . . ." (p. 21). "Baptism in the name of Christ is Baptism *in the sphere where Christ reveals His name and works miracles by the power of the Holy Spirit. . .* It is into that sphere of miracle that our children are baptized, the sphere where the whole person, in the unity of body and soul, is the object of the Spirit's operation. Baptism into the name of the Lord Jesus Christ is thus no mere ecclesiastical reception or dedication, but in very truth an ordinance commanded by Christ in which He acts supernaturally by the power of His Spirit. This gives us the greatest confidence in the Baptism of our children and in the hallowing of the Christian home which rests upon the Sacrament" (p. 17). Such language makes one wonder why the benefits claimed for Infant Baptism should be restricted to the children of "Christian homes," especially in view of what the authors say later about the Blessing of the Children in the Gospels. Consider the following: "Was the blessing of the children by Jesus efficacious or not? To that we can only answer: It was without doubt efficacious. Christ's blessing of the infants makes them capable of receiving the Holy Spirit. These children were taken up in the arms of the Word made flesh, their Creator. He who made them, creates in them the capacity for receiving Him. The capacity for receiving Christ must never be judged in terms of the receiver but in terms of Christ the Giver who gives Himself to us. But if these infant children are by His blessing made capable of receiving Him, who can forbid them to be baptized into the name of the Christ who so blesses them?" (p. 25). Granted such presuppositions, we in turn can only answer: Who, indeed? But why, then, not baptize all infants?

The truth is, the authors never really succeed in making clear what they suppose happens in Baptism, least of all in the Baptism

of infants. We are repeatedly told that the rite places its recipients under the care of the Church, and within the sphere of the Holy Spirit's quickening and sanctifying energies. With such ideas, many Baptists will not be disposed to quarrel, for they express something which we gladly recognize as akin to the purposes of our own Infant Dedication Services. But to imagine that this disposes of the objections to Infant Baptism is to miss the real point. As F. J. Leenhardt has said: "On dit souvent, en faveur du baptême des enfants, des choses excellentes à tout point de vue, qui n'ont que le défaut de ne pas être appropriées à ce sacrement."³ Baptists do not reject Infant Baptism on the ground that it sets forth the love of Christ for infants and obeys His will that His Church should receive and care for them. They oppose it because they believe that the use of water in this service perverts the scriptural meaning of Baptism, and so endangers the conception of the Church as a society of believers in Jesus Christ. Certainly this Report will do little to reassure them on these points. Rather the reverse. For there runs through it the persistent assumption that to bring an infant within the "sphere" of Christ's presence and activity (to use the term frequently employed here) is *ipso facto* the same thing as his becoming personally united with Christ. Thus, starting from the fact that at Pentecost the disciples were baptized with the Holy Spirit, the authors continue: "*This corporate Baptism of the Church stands behind the Baptism of every individual and is prior to every administration of the Sacrament of Baptism.* It is only through and within the Church created by this corporate Baptism that true administration of the Sacrament of Baptism can take place. When an individual is baptized within this Church he too is baptized into Christ who was born of the Spirit, who died, and who rose again. Hence his Baptism is his new birth, the beginning of a new life in the Spirit, in which he grows up in knowledge and stature into the manhood of Christ. That is why the Baptism of children born of parents within the Church is so right that it is taken for granted in the New Testament" (p. 32). Baptism, we are told, is "the Sacrament of regeneration, in which we are born anew in Christ and He is formed anew in us" (p. 41). "Being 'baptized into the name of Christ' thus means being baptized into Christ Himself, so that we are grafted together with Him in a real and substantial union, as Calvin usually puts it. . . . It is a living union that grows throughout our whole life and is continually nourished by the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The child baptised into Christ is grafted into Him as a branch in the Vine" (p. 18). (The Report admits that "the logic of infant incorporation into the Body of Christ" seems to demand also infant participation in the Lord's Supper. But it rejects this conclusion on the ground that Baptism

³ *Le Baptême chrétien*, p. 70.

is "an act done upon us 'as little children,' but in the Lord's Supper the command is: 'This *do* in remembrance of me'" (p. 28). The weakness of this answer when considered in relation, at least, to the possibility of child-communicants, speaks for itself).

In the light of such teaching, the question may fairly be asked whether the attempt to correlate the Christian Church with the Living Christ is not here pressed to the point at which it falls under the same condemnation as that which the authors of this Report pronounce upon heresies which confound the divine and human natures of Christ. It is one thing to say, in accordance with *Romans vi.*, that "we were buried with Christ by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life," when the candidate is one who thereby professes his personal repentance towards God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But it is surely quite another thing to apply this language to infants who are incapable of a personal decision, and to assume that in their case admission into the "operational sphere" of the Holy Spirit is identical with personal adhesion to Christ. Hard as the fact must ever be to accept, the call of Jesus Christ comes to men one by one. He addresses them, not as members of a particular family or tribe or nation, but as responsible individuals, who cannot be admitted to discipleship by proxy, but must make their own personal decision upon His claims. The solemn words of Jesus: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children . . . yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple," remain as a standing warning against every temptation to whittle down the crucial demand of the Gospel for personal repentance and faith.

Thus, in spite of the high intentions of this Report, it is to be feared that it will do little through its doctrine of Baptism to evoke that personal dedication to Christ which its authors plainly desire, and which, in our totalitarian age, seems likely to be our final bulwark in defence of human freedom and responsibility before God. For while the authors admit that "it is total immersion that supplies the ordinance with its most vivid representation" (p. 46), they cannot apparently see that the act of Baptism (whether by immersion or by sprinkling) only becomes *sacramental* when the candidate concerned is able to make it the vehicle of his own personal adhesion to Jesus Christ, thus glorifying the Lord whose Spirit at once initiates and seals the ordinance which His Church observes.

These are but preliminary observations. The final test of this Report will be the extent to which the authors may be judged to have observed their own principle: "*We must try hard to be true and faithful to the distinctive outlook of the Bible and to what the New Testament says to us, letting its teaching criticise us in order that our conceptions and formulations may be re-formed in obedi-*

ence to the mind of Christ" (p. 5). For the real question with which we are all faced today is not when or how the Early Church first began to practise Infant Baptism, but whether the introduction of this rite was an inspired interpretation of the mind of Christ, or was not rather, as Baptists are constrained to believe, such a deviation from it as history and experience alike suggest has done great harm and seriously endangered the very existence of the Ordinance entrusted by Christ to His people. To the fresh examination of that question this Report challenges us all.

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A Baptist Bibliography. Section C-Colby, edited by Edward C. Starr. (American Baptist Historical Society, 1954).

Attention has already been called to earlier sections of this great bibliography. The nearly 300 pages of this fourth section go as far as a series of entries on Colby College, Waterville. They include the fullest bibliographical lists yet prepared regarding William Carey and John Clifford, and are therefore of the greatest importance for British Baptists. Those dealing with Carey occupy fifteen pages; those with Clifford, eight pages. Other British entries of special interest concern writers as varied as Matthew Caffyn, Peter Chamberlain and Abraham Cheare, of the seventeenth century, Alexander Carson, the great Scottish Baptist apologist, Carey's sons, G. R. R. Cameron, John Chamberlain and James Chater, of the B.M.S., and S. Pearce Carey and J. C. Carlile, from more recent times. The entries on Shirley Jackson Case and W. O. Carver will also be of value to many besides American Baptists. Mr. Starr has added to this instalment an attractive essay entitled, "A Garland of Baptist Flowers," in which he indicates some of the problems he is having to overcome in the monumental task he has set himself. All students of Baptist history must be grateful to him for his courage and industry and will eagerly await the appearance of further sections.

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