

The Place of Baptism in Baptist Churches of To-day.

An address given to the Ministers' Session of the London Baptist Association at Woolwich, June, 27th, 1922.

THE aim of this paper is not to go over the familiar New Testament proofs that baptism originally meant the immersion of believers on the profession of personal faith in Christ, nor to trace the historical process by which the aspersion of infants has been substituted for it in the greater part of the Universal Church, nor to denounce the inconsistencies or errors underlying the differing interpretations of infant baptism given by our fellow-Christians of other churches. The subject is the place of baptism in the Baptist Churches of to-day, its meaning and its function for ourselves. My references to the interpretations given by other Christian Churches will be, so far as I can make them, sympathetic and positive. A common fault of many addresses on baptism by Baptists is that they are too negative, that they are often more concerned with showing what New Testament baptism is not, rather than what it is.

I. THE PLACE OF BAPTISM IN NON-BAPTIST CHURCHES.

A convenient starting-point is given by the brief reference to Baptism in the recent report of the Lambeth Joint Conference, a report which has aroused considerable controversy in Baptist circles. It is there said that "Baptism is by the ordinance of Christ and of His Apostles the outward and visible sign of admission into membership of the Church." Such a statement is obviously an attempt to find the Greatest Common Measure of a number of conflicting views, and those who know the difficulty of finding such a formula will be least likely to indulge in carping criticism of it. But if we are inclined to accept it, strictly for that purpose, several things must be remembered. It is quite true that amongst Baptists, baptism is usually "the outward and visible sign of admission into the membership of the Church"—but the sign derives its meaning from what the Church is understood to be. The Report indeed tells us that the Church "consists of all those

who have been or are being redeemed by and in Christ," but the appropriation of this redemption and its relation to baptism is, for obvious reasons, left undefined. Faustus Socinus could have accepted the definition before us, for in the Raccovian Catechism, baptism is defined as "a rite of initiation." Initiation into what? there, of course, the possible ambiguities begin. I am reminded of a joint conference in the north in which I took part. The Anglican view of baptism was stated, and then the Baptist, whereupon I was asked by the Anglican chairman whether since Anglicans held to regeneration by baptism and Baptists to regeneration by conversion, we could not find common ground in that we both believed in regeneration. The question might form an exercise for a class in logic, and we should hope that some bright mind might detect the fallacy of ambiguous middle. But there is something more important here than the perils or advantages of ambiguity: *Does* the New Testament regard baptism as "the outward and visible sign of admission into membership of the Church"? That may be a natural description for the second century, when the Church was taking shape as an organized institution, but in the New Testament it is primarily a spiritual community, whose life-breath is the Spirit of Christ, and water-baptism is the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual baptism of the Holy Spirit: "in one Spirit," says Paul, "were we all baptized into one body . . . and were all made to drink of one Spirit."

We may, however, agree to take the statement of the report as representing the maximum agreement as to baptism in the Christian Churches of to-day. Consider, briefly and quite sympathetically, what it is that representative Churches would add to that definition, in order to lead up to our own distinctive (Baptist) statement. In the significantly bare form of the "Book of Congregational Worship," the essential things are a promise by those who bring the child that he shall be brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and a declaration of trust by the minister that "hereafter he shall not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ." That is dedication at its simplest, and no explanation is offered of its connection with baptism, except for words borrowed from the Anglican liturgy though hardly in the same meaning!—"We receive this child into the congregation of Christ's flock." The same words appear in the Wesleyan order, with the addition "that he may be instructed and trained in the doctrines, privileges and duties of the Christian religion." The prayers for a change in the child's nature *follow* instead of preceding the act of baptism, and the emphasis falls on the covenant of the parents, to be subsequently realized in the personal

covenant to be made by the child when he comes to responsible years. The Presbyterian order emphasises the doctrine that baptism is a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, which includes children as well as parents. Baptism is a divine pledge that God will fulfil His part in giving grace. The Anglican service takes us into a different realm, for it prays *before* the act of baptism, "sanctify this water to the mystical washing away of sin," and declares *after* the act, that "this child is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ's Church." The emphasis here falls on the actual activity of divine grace in water-baptism, not on the pledge of future activity. The underlying doctrine that baptism cleanses the child from the guilt of original sin, that is the guilt involved in his descent from Adam, finds fullest expression in the canons of the Council of Trent, which frankly make baptism necessary to salvation. So we reach the opposite pole to the total rejection of water-baptism, by the Quakers; their attitude is that, as Robert Barclay says, "we do always prefer the power to the form, the substance to the shadow," and "we find not anything called the seal and pledge of our inheritance, but the Spirit of God."

2. THE PLACE OF BAPTISM IN THE BAPTIST CHURCHES.

The common element which is found in all these interpretations of baptism is the necessary *passivity* of the infant baptized. Whether baptism be called dedication, or covenanting by parents, or the sealing of a divine covenant, or an actual regeneration, it is throughout something done to, nothing done by, the baptized. So far as he is concerned, all of them are non-moral acts, though the act of the parents or sponsors is properly moral. The Baptist position is not simply one phase in this succession of interpretations; it stands outside of them all as the only baptism which is strictly and primarily an ethical act on the part of the baptized. That, if we care to remember our origins, is the natural logic of Separatism, the proper sequence of the idea of a separated Church. John Smyth was writing his autobiography, when he said that "The Separation must either go back to England (i.e. the Anglican Church) or go forward to true baptism." A pædo-baptist Separatist is always in unstable equilibrium, which explains why baptism falls into a relatively insignificant place, or drops out altogether, amongst Congregationalists. The Baptist stands or falls by his conception of what the Church is; his plea for believers' baptism becomes an archaeological idiosyncrasy, if it be not the expression of the fundamental constitution of the Church, as the

body of those who have been baptized into the Spirit of Christ, as witnessed by the evidence of moral purpose and character.

But if we are ever to justify this position, we must put the emphasis in the right place. We must frankly and clearly say, and say it again and again, that the external act of baptism is always subordinate and secondary to the baptism of Spirit. Better far to take the Quaker position out and out than to obscure that emphasis. Yet we know how it is obscured by what seems to many our superstitious insistence on the quantity of water. An amusing instance of this popular confusion is given in the life of the late Henry Barclay Swete. As a curate, he publicly baptized an infant by immersion, strictly in accord with the rubric of the prayer-book. But this unheard-of act created a commotion in the parish which led the old parish clerk to say, with grave shaking of the head, "Mr. Henry ought never to have done such a thing; that were believer's baptism." Personally I think it would be a real loss and a real misfortune to the Christian Church if baptism by immersion were not to be represented by a living testimony in the Church. But if we let others think that immersion is of the essence of the matter in our eyes, we gravely imperil our real witness to baptism as a personal profession of repentance and faith, an act at once moral and religious, an act of human personality entering into conscious fellowship with the divine. It is worthy of notice and a fact which we ought to teach our people, that the first modern Baptist Churches, General or Particular, practised affusion, not immersion, and that immersion was in both cases, an afterthought. The principle of believers' baptism arose independently of the question of the best mode of expressing it, and they should still be distinguished.

We must certainly eliminate the question of the proper mode of baptism when we turn to two questions of considerable importance on which Baptists are divided, viz., the distinct questions of "strict" or "open" communion, and of baptized or "open" membership. In regard to the question of "strict" communion, I do not propose to stir the dust of ancient controversy, and to revive the arguments of Bunyan against Kiffin in the seventeenth century, or of Robinson and the Rylands against Booth in the eighteenth, or of Robert Hall against Joseph Kinghorn in the nineteenth. It is perhaps sufficient to point out that the issue is practically settled for the greater number of British Baptists. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Robert Hall could write "Strict Communion is the general practice of our churches, though the abettors of the opposite opinion are rapidly increasing both in numbers and respectability" (II. 16). At the beginning

of the twentieth, Charles Williams could write, "Charles Haddon Spurgeon, with the majority of British Baptists, invited all who loved the Lord Jesus Christ to commemorate with them His love in dying for them" (page 25). That result has come about by the larger logic of the essential unity of the Church, over against the narrower logic that a man is not fully a Christian in our sense unless he has been baptized according to what we regard as the New Testament baptism. For to most of us in this country it certainly seems that to exclude a fellow-Christian from the Lord's table is to reflect on his Christianity—that is certainly what *we* feel when the Anglican refuses such communion to ourselves. But the question of "open" membership is distinct from this, and calls for particular notice at the present time. There are not a few members of Baptist Churches who have never been baptized in any external sense. This strikes not unsympathetic observers as a curious anomaly. A few days ago, a distinguished Presbyterian said to me, "I can't make you Baptists out. There seem to be two distinct parties among you. I can understand the position of the strict Baptist, but I cannot understand that you, of all Churches, should admit un-baptized persons into your fellowship." It would certainly be a curious result, if the practice of open membership should become as predominant amongst us as that of open communion has done! Our dictionaries would then define a Baptist Church as the only one which did not make baptism a condition of admission. But before we shake our heads in alarm at this melancholy prospect, let us consider what is really involved. I have urged that the question is not to be settled off-hand by the analogy of the open communion question. The Lord's Supper is the Lord's gift to the Church; it lies outside our jurisdiction in a sense in which the administration of the affairs of a local community of Christians do not. It seems to me a matter of expediency rather than of principle as to whether that community shall consist only of those who are personally pledged to the practice of believers' baptism, or whether others, acknowledged to be Christians also, should also share in the administration of that particular Church. Under our present constitution and polity, we cannot refuse the right to an independent judgment on the part of each Church to judge for itself as to what is expedient, whilst equally we could not deny the right of the majority to refuse to recognize as a Baptist Church one in which the testimony to believers' baptism ceased to be effective. That there is a certain peril in the increase of open-membership Churches I do not deny, though I doubt whether the peril is as great as it seems, if the ministry itself be genuinely Baptist. I

was brought up in the Church of the Rylands, and listened at the reception of each group of new members to the words of the Church covenant:—

And whereas we differ in our Judgments about Water-baptism, We do now Solemnly declare, That we that are for Infant-Baptism do not hereby, nor will not impose on the [consciences] of any of our Brethren or Sisters that are among us who are for Baptism upon Profession of Faith. And on the other hand We that are for Believers' Baptism do not, nor will not impose upon the Consciences of any of our Brethren or Sisters that are amongst us that are for Infant Baptism.

Yet, in practice, College Street, Northampton, was and is a consistently Baptist Church, and most Churches would envy the constant succession of baptisms by immersion upon profession of faith under the ministry of John Turland Brown. If you have a convinced Baptist at the head of an open-membership Church, I do not think you need fear the issue.

But are all Baptist ministers convinced Baptists? That, I think, is one of the most important issues before the Baptist Church of to-day, and by it will be decided the future of the Baptist denomination. If I may judge from private intercourse with my fellow-ministers, there are not a few of the younger men who whilst regarding believers' baptism by immersion as the New Testament baptism, are asking themselves whether its distinct denominational maintenance is really justified in face of far more important and living issues. I am convinced that we are reaching a point at which we must make more of baptism, if much less is not to be made of it. The chief point, indeed, of what I want to say is that baptism is not maintaining its importance in the eyes of many among us, because Baptists are not proclaiming with sufficient clearness the full doctrine of the New Testament Baptism. I have urged this point once already before the London Baptist Association, and I am glad you have given me the opportunity of returning to it. My point is briefly expressed by saying that we have been so driven to the assertion of *believers'* baptism, as against the baptism of infants, that we have failed to maintain the not less important emphasis on believers' *baptism*, in the fulness of the New Testament meaning, a baptism of the Holy Spirit.

If we are to be convinced men ourselves, and to convince others, it is not enough to say that to baptize means to

* Since the above was written I have been told of an instance in which three suitable candidates for baptism were refused by a "Baptist" minister in a Baptist Church, on the ground that believers' baptism by immersion might offend certain pædo-baptist worshippers!

dip, or that faith always precedes baptism in the New Testament, and that infant-baptism is a later device. Great principles are not decided by archaeology, any more than great thoughts by etymology. The flank of such arguments, however true, is easily turned by the remark, "Is it worth while to insist on such things, worth while for those who see life steadily and see it whole?" Nor is it enough to take refuge in a command, and make baptism simply a matter of obedience. Sufficient as that is to many, it may easily become a mere piece of legalism, which fails to take us into Pauline Christianity. I do not think that Paul was making light of baptism, as some argue, when he said, "I thank God that I baptized none of you." But I remember how he regarded the observance even of the sabbath as but a shadow of reality (Col. ii., 16). If we are to convince men that the command to be baptized is still binding upon them as a moral and religious act, it must be by showing that it is still intrinsically worth while. On what grounds can we argue this? Let me summarise familiar arguments in order to lead to one that is less familiar than it should be.

3. THE INTRINSIC WORTH OF BELIEVERS' BAPTISM.

(1) Modern psychology has thrown into brilliant relief the importance of *acts* as influencing thoughts. "Actions speak louder than words." There must be some definite act of repentance and of faith, if they are not to become obscure and dim in retrospect. We live largely by memory, but memory depends upon landmarks. Hence the New Testament, with unerring instinct, anticipates our psychology, and says, "with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation" (Rom. x. 10). I have no doubt that Paul is here referring to the confession of faith made at baptism. Now the baptism of believers emphasises more emphatically than any words, that which the believer confessed at his baptism in words, viz., the repentance and faith, the conversion from darkness to light which is one half of the meaning of baptism. Paul appeals again and again to the baptism of believers, especially in the sixth of Romans, as the foundation of his moral or religious exhortations. "You know where you were then," he says, "see what you ought to be now." Baptists alone or practically alone in the Universal Church can make such appeals, for to all other Churches baptism predominantly means something which can never be remembered by the infant. No really moral appeal to the grown man can be based on what others did to him as an infant.

(2) In the second place, it has become increasingly impossible for men of any historic sense, men with vision of the perspective of history, to accept any ancient creed in the exact sense of the original words. We may read our own meaning into them, and honestly think we mean what they said; but if we take the words in their historic meaning, we shall find inevitable changes from one generation to another, without any necessary break of real continuity. Now the two great creeds of the Universal Church, the Apostles', and the Nicene, were originally baptismal confessions, the expression of that which the baptized person accepted as his faith. They are of real value still as marking the historic line of development of the Christian faith, and as challenging each of us to test his own faith by that line. But Baptists who stand for the maintenance of that very baptism of believers out of which these two creeds have developed, are in a position of unique opportunity, if they will only realize their privilege. We, less than any other part of the Christian Church, are dependent on creeds, because we have maintained that personal profession of faith in baptism from which these creeds themselves have sprung. Because of that personal profession of loyalty, made in baptism itself more clearly and forcibly by us than by any other part of the Church, we can afford to make less of any form of words, however true. One of the great reasons for maintaining the method of immersion is its symbolic expression of the historical truths on which our faith rests—the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ—and of that personal union with Him which true faith implies. That is our creed, expressed in a manner far better than mere words. It gives the necessary liberty to changing forms of language and idea, yet it secures the continuity of the evangelical faith, as the present spirit and temper of Baptist Churches of to-day clearly proves. I believe that this is a part of the case for believers' baptism by immersion which would make a great appeal to many thoughtful men to-day, if it were clearly stated, and given its full weight.

(3) But most of all, I want to urge that our peculiar denominational emphasis on believers' baptism should enable us to meet a great need of the religious life of to-day, I mean the recovery of the New Testament emphasis on the Holy Spirit. We have been unconsciously afraid of teaching the relation of the gift of the Spirit and water-baptism, because so much is made of it by those who believe in baptismal regeneration and appeal to the words, "Ye must be born of water and the Spirit." We have thrown our emphasis on baptism as a personal and human profession of repentance and faith. It is that, and that needed to be emphasised. But

the uniquely ethical character of our baptism safeguards us from the risk of misunderstanding, and leaves full room for the evangelical sacramentalism of the New Testament. The moral and religious experience of repentance and faith becomes the channel of the Spirit, and is psychologically reinforced by the definite expression of this experience in water-baptism. If we teach men that water-baptism is of real value on the human side—if it is not, we have no right to practice it—may we not teach that it is in the same way of value on the divine, possibly a real occasion, always a powerful declaration, of that baptism of the Spirit which is the true secret of Christian sanctification? It is of baptism with this deep meaning that the apostle speaks when he says, "One Lord, one faith, one baptism" (Eph. iv. 4,5), for he has just said, "There is one body, and one Spirit." It is of the divine significance of baptism as the outward expression of the inward gift of grace that he writes, "But ye were washed, but ye were sanctified, but ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. vi. 11). It is of water-baptism, as the sign of spiritual baptism that he says, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ" (Gal. iii. 27). In fact there could be no *Christian* baptism in the full sense before Pentecost.

I believe that by the fuller proclamation of this divine side of baptism, as the expression of divine grace, not less than, and in the same sense as, we already make it the expression of human faith, we should draw nearer to the New Testament, regain some of the real truths about baptism which other Churches have expressed in spite of their errors, and that we should also do not a little to strengthen our own convictions and the convictions of our people in regard to the value of believers' baptism. If you put little meaning into a rite, it will inevitably tend to drop out, just as the rite of Baptism tends to do among the Congregationalists. If you put much meaning into it, the rite will become of central importance, just as it is in the Catholic Church. But what we need to do is to put the whole New Testament truth into it, which is amply sufficient to deliver us from the errors of Catholicism. If we do that, I believe we need have no fear of consequences, and that even where there is open membership, the intrinsic worth of believers' baptism will maintain its observance. But if we do not make more of baptism than we are doing, I fear that we shall as a denomination, make still less, and that open membership may become a line of drift into Congregationalism, which I should personally deplore. It is in no narrow spirit of mere denominationalism, I trust, but in the interests of the whole Church, which still needs that portion

of truth we bring to its common good, that I venture to apply to our Baptist testimony the words which Wellington wrote of the maintenance of his position at Torres Vedras, on which the issues of the Peninsular War and the ultimate overthrow of Napoleon depended: "I conceive that the honour and interest of our country require that we should hold our ground here as long as possible; and please God, I will maintain it as long as I can."

H. WHEELER ROBINSON.

The Late Midland College.

Historical Section.

IT seems desirable, since this institution has come to an end, that some record of its beginning, its progress and its service to our denomination, should be preserved. In the first number of *The Baptist Quarterly* Dr. Whitley has reminded us that whilst the Bristol (Ministerial) Education Society was first in the field to provide for Baptist needs, it was followed by a General Baptist Education Society which "was gravely affected in its theology by the general Arian drift" of the eighteenth century, and did not long survive. But it had a rival in the New Connexion "Academy," which under different names and in different locations, continued its useful work until 1920—a period of 123 years. The "General Baptist College" was therefore the third Baptist College to come into existence.

I. ORIGIN AND PURPOSE.

The term "Academy" is significant. It was used of all good schools, whether kept by ministers or by ladies. At one time or another it was descriptive of such colleges as Horton (now Rawdon) and Hoxton (now Hackney). The modest designation was due to the fact that it was not possible at first to do more than place a few students under the care of some trusted and competent minister for training, and often the arrangement wore the aspect of a higher boarding-school.

Soon after Rev. Dan Taylor had founded the New Connexion of General Baptists in 1770, he became concerned about the better equipment of its ministers. "Men of culture and ability were rare in the ministry and an educated pastorate was slighted." At the annual meeting of the G. B. Association in 1797, it was resolved to provide an Academy, and Mr.