

Methodism and Baptism.

IN writing of Methodist doctrine on any subject it is well to remember that Methodism began as an Evangelistic movement and not as a church. When Wesley and his preachers joyfully traversed the length and breadth of England, they were set upon one thing only—to “beseech sinners to return to God.” Rightly or wrongly, they did not think that they needed to say anything much about Baptism. The subject was sometimes thrust upon them, as will appear directly, but they knew that the great mass of their hearers had been baptised in infancy, and, if others had been content to leave the matter there, probably they would have said nothing about it.

Others, however, soon began to say something about it. One source of information on this subject, as on many others, is John Wesley’s *Journal*.¹ It shows that in the days of his mighty evangelism adults sometimes asked him to baptise them. They seem usually to have been Quakers, but one was an “Anabaptist” and another a Portuguese Jew.² More than once Wesley notes how great seasons of blessing these adult baptisms were. I can well believe it, for though I have never been present at a Baptist administration of this Sacrament, one of the memories of my life is of an adult baptism at our little Marathi Church in Bombay. The other references to Baptism in the *Journal* concern the Baptists of Wesley’s day. I regret to say that he uniformly depicts Baptists as a controversial folk! Here are two instances—“I had a visit from Mr. S., an honest, zealous Anabaptist teacher. Finding he *would* dispute, I let him dispute, and held him to the point till between eleven and twelve o’clock. By that time he was willing to take breath. Perhaps he may be less fond of dispute for the time to come.”³ “At one I preached at Tipton Green, where the Baptists have been making havoc of the flock; which constrained me, in speaking on those words, ‘Arise, and be baptised, and wash away thy sins,’ to spend near ten minutes in controversy; which is more than I had done in

¹ This shows that in Georgia—that is, of course, before his heart was “strangely warmed”—the young High Churchman refused to baptise children except by immersion, as he thought this had been the custom of the Early Church.—*Journal*, May 5th, 1736.

² *Journal*, January 25th, 1739; April 6th, 1748; October 16th, 1756; December 5th, 1757.

³ *Journal*, January 13th, 1746. It will be noticed that Wesley, like many others, connected the Anabaptist movement on the Continent with the Baptist movement in England.

public for many months (perhaps years) before.”⁴ It would be interesting to have a version of these encounters from the other side!

Yet disputes with Baptists seem to have been occasional and sporadic. In one place, indeed, Wesley refers to “the smallness of their number” in England.⁵ The chief difficulty of the evangelists on this subject lay elsewhere. For this we must turn to Wesley’s *Sermons*. One of his favourite subjects was Regeneration or “The New Birth,” and it was his custom to urge that if a man is “born again” he may know it. Indeed, in his earlier preaching he said that he must know it. This, of course, is the famous Evangelical doctrine of “assurance.” For any member of the Anglican Church the retort was obvious—“Well, but I was born again when I was baptised in infancy,” for it is undoubted that in the twenty-seventh of the Thirty-Nine Articles a form of the doctrine of Baptismal Regeneration is taught. It is taught also in the Order in the Prayer Book for the “Ministration of Publick Baptism of Infants” (1662), and in the Catechism. Wesley claimed all his life to be a faithful member of the Church of England. What was he to say to this challenge?

His answer fell into two parts. First, he had an answer as an evangelist. A quotation from his sermon on “The Marks of the New Birth” will illustrate this. After defining these “marks” as faith, hope and love, and exhibiting the true scope and depth of the three great qualities, he goes on “Every one of you . . . cannot but feel and know of a truth, whether at this hour (answer to God and not to man!) you are thus a child of God or no. The question is not what you was made⁶ in baptism (do not evade); but, what are you now? Is the Spirit of Adoption now in your heart? To your own heart let the appeal be made. I ask not whether you *was* born of water and of the Spirit; but are you *now* the temple of the Holy Ghost which dwelleth in you? I allow you was ‘circumcised with the circumcision of the heart’ (as St. Paul emphatically terms baptism); but does the Spirit of God and of glory *now* rest upon you? Else, ‘your circumcision is become uncircumcision.’ Say not then in your heart, ‘I *was once* baptised, therefore I *am now* a child of God.’ Alas, that consequence will by no means hold. How many are the baptised gluttons and drunkards, the baptised liars and common swearers, the baptised railers and evil-speakers, the baptised whoremongers, thieves, extortioners? . . . Lean no

⁴ *Journal*, April 3rd, 1751.

⁵ *A Further Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, III., 3.

⁶ Wesley is here addressing his hearers individually. In the eighteenth century “you was” was often used in speaking to a single person.

more on the staff of that broken reed, that ye *were* born again in baptism. Who denies that ye were then made children of God, and heirs of the kingdom of heaven? But, notwithstanding this, ye are now children of the devil. Therefore, ye must be born again."

Is this an evasion? Or is it not rather an instance of the way in which a great preacher, knowing that there are intellectual difficulties attending a great doctrine and that he cannot deal with these adequately within the compass of a single sermon, keeps to his practical purpose and refuses to let his hearers "ride off" on excuses? It seems to me to be the latter. Yet, of course, Wesley knew that there was an apparent inconsistency and that he ought to deal with it. There is a hint on his way of escape in the quotation just given, but it appears more clearly in his *Treatise on Baptism*, published in 1756. In effect he declares that the word "regeneration" may be used in two senses and that one is apposite to Baptism and the other to Conversion. The second sense will have sufficiently appeared above. What was the first? The *Treatise on Baptism* is in the main a typical eighteenth-century exposition of the doctrine of Infant Baptism, but one of the immediately relative sentences runs, "What are the benefits we receive in baptism? . . . The first of these is the washing away the guilt of original sin, by the application of the merits of Christ's death." I need not stay to examine the theology implied here, nor need I say that no Methodist would use such terms to-day. I think that beneath the unfortunate phrase "original sin" there lies a grim truth, and I could call Freud in to witness what it is, but the word "guilt" seems to me quite inadmissible of a new-born child. None the less, it will be seen that Wesley did save his consistency. "Baptism," he says in effect, "saves us from the guilt of original sin, but, my hearers, what about your own personal sins? To be saved from these, ye must be born again." Again, later in the same paragraph Wesley does not scruple to say that baptism is "the ordinary instrument of our justification." He means that a baptised child, if it die, is saved by the grace of God, for he goes on to point out that the Anglican Church, at the end of the Baptismal Office, has this rubric—"It is certain, by God's word, that children who are baptised, dying before they commit actual sin, are saved." But neither the rubric nor Wesley says what happens to *unbaptised* children who die "before they commit actual sin." The only hint here is the use of the word "ordinary" in the phrase quoted above.⁷

⁷ Some further details of Wesley's beliefs about Baptism may be gathered from his pamphlet *A Roman Catechism*, but these are omitted here for want of space.

Happily the *Treatise on Baptism* has never been one of the authoritative documents of Methodism, and it is time to turn to these. In 1743 Wesley drew up "Rules" for his "United Societies." In these there is no mention of Baptism at all. This is only one instance of the general phenomenon that no formal creed was required of the Members of the Societies on any doctrine whatsoever. It is to be remembered that Wesley was thinking of his "Societies," not of a church. There is no doubt that he counted Baptism as integral to the Church of Christ. None the less the Rules were not altered when his Societies grew into a church, and to this day no formal creed on any subject is demanded of Members of the Methodist Church. From Preachers, as distinct from Members, Wesley did ask some degree of agreement about doctrine. While the ultimate authority, of course, was to be the New Testament, Wesley's exposition of it as contained in two of his works, the *Notes on the New Testament*, and the first forty-four of his *Sermons*, was to be the "standard" exposition for Methodist Preachers. People outside Methodism often smile at this way of dealing with creeds, especially those who haven't read the two volumes, and I am tempted to point out some of the advantages of the method, but I will content myself by saying that after trying it for a century and a half, Methodists are so satisfied with it that these two works find a place in the constitution of the new Methodist Church. What do they say about Baptism? Nothing, I think, that has not been already said. I have illustrated above the practical way in which the subject was thrust upon the early Methodist Preachers, and Wesley's method in reply. In the *Forty-Four Sermons* there is practically nothing else. Even in a sermon on "The Means of Grace," while great emphasis is laid on the Lord's Supper, Baptism isn't named. As for "*the Notes*," the chief passage is the comment on the words, "Except a man be born of water and the Spirit." This runs as follows—"Except he experience that great inward change by the Spirit, and be baptised (wherever baptism can be had) as the outward sign and means of it." This, of course, does not face all the difficulties. If now it is asked why so little is said on the subject in the Methodist "Standards," the reply again is that Wesley was thinking of the preaching of a number of itinerating evangelists, not of the formulation of a technical creed. Further, it was not his wish that his Preachers should administer either Sacrament. I need not trace the way in which he found it impossible altogether to follow this wish. So far as he could, he followed it. For instance, in his final hymnbook of 1780 there are no hymns for either Sacrament. I think it is true that in his two standard volumes he said as little as he could

about the problems of Baptism, especially Infant Baptism, for he said as little as he could on any Christian controversy. He sent his preachers not to settle problems but to proclaim a gospel.

To pass to the century that followed Wesley's death—and, since I know *Wesleyan* Methodism best, to confine ourselves to that—we find that the demand of the Methodist people that their own Ministers should administer the Sacraments to them, which had been held in check during Wesley's lifetime by reverence for him, grew quickly irresistible. There were indeed still two opinions on the question, and the Conference—which now became the ultimate authority in Methodism—cautiously declared that its Preachers should only administer the Sacraments in those places where the people *unanimously* desired it. Yet even so the practice spread until it was universal. I need hardly say that, while on occasion adults were baptised, this was regarded as exceptional, and that by Baptism the Methodist people meant Infant Baptism. What Order of Service did the Preachers use? Sometimes the Order of the Prayer Book and sometimes one of Wesley's own. For, as it happened, he had drawn up an Order in 1784 for the Methodists of America. At the close of the Revolutionary War most of the Anglican clergy and some of the Methodist Preachers left the United States, and the people were left "as sheep not having a shepherd." There is here another long story, but it must suffice to say that the Methodists of America wrote and wrote and wrote to Wesley, imploring him either to come himself to set things in order, or, if that were impossible, to send some representative to do so. At length he sent Dr. Coke, and with him he sent a Book of Offices. One of the chief proofs of his marvellous influence is that the American Methodists received both enthusiastically. So that, when the English Methodists were in need of an Order for Baptism, they had one of Wesley's to their hand. It was based on the Anglican Liturgy, but it differed from it both by omission and alteration. It omitted the large part of the Anglican Form that has to do with sponsors, and the passage about the Sign of the Cross. In two of the three places where the word "regenerate" occurs, the phrase is changed—for instance, for "Seeing now that this child is regenerate and grafted into the body of Christ's church," Wesley substituted "Seeing now that this child is admitted into the body of Christ's visible church," but it is left in the third. This is in the opening exhortation, where the passage in the Third of John is paraphrased. It will be seen that this is consonant with his distinction, described above, between the benefit of Baptism, the removal of the "guilt of original sin," and the Pauline "New Birth." This Form was in use in the Wesleyan Methodist Church till 1882, and it was never formally forbidden.

Indeed, in 1840 the Conference directed that the two Sacraments "shall always be administered according to the Liturgy of the Church of England, or according to the Abridgement of that Liturgy by Mr. Wesley." I suspect that, like their brethren of later days, the Ministers often abbreviated even the shorter Form. For one thing, as Baptism was usually administered in the course of Sunday Morning worship, the service needed to be brief. For another, questions began to be asked about the doctrine apparently implied in some of its phrases.⁸

These questions found voice in the Conference of 1836. In that year Jabez Bunting was President for the third time. He was the "strong man" in Wesleyan Methodism, for good and for ill, from about 1820 to about 1860. In Gregory's *Side-lights on the Conflicts of Methodism*⁹ we find that in the year named a leading Minister named Atherton, who was himself President ten years later, "pronounced" the Baptismal Service "to be at some points at variance with our doctrinal standards," whereupon Bunting himself said, "There are many things in that Form which nothing in the world could induce me to use." Clearly he, at least, was accustomed to abbreviate the Service! And when a Minister asked whether the Sign of the Cross could be used in Baptism, the President indignantly replied that "we should not allow such questions to be proposed." Again, in 1844, when a Minister named Powell said that "he believed in baptismal regeneration and that Mr. Wesley did so," Bunting replied that "Mr. Powell must attach some peculiar meaning to the word 'regeneration'—that is, peculiar for a Methodist—and went on to draw attention to the distinction made by Wesley in his *Sermons*, as noted above. Dr. Bunting's son, W. M. Bunting, went so far as to say, "I could not remain a member of this Body if I did not abjure the doctrine of Baptismal regeneration."¹⁰

Here the dates are important. The Oxford Movement, with its strong assertion of Baptismal Regeneration, began in 1833, and there was a reaction against it in Methodism, as elsewhere. At the Conference of 1840 the same Mr. Atherton declared that he would rather use no Form at all than that of the Anglican Church, for the latter "is full of heresy." Again, the "Book-

⁸ In passing it may be noted that Methodists took some part in discussions with Baptists. These, no doubt, followed familiar lines, though one of the doughtier Methodist disputants, Rev. Daniel Isaac, who died in 1834, made an original contribution. I haven't read his book, but Dr. A. W. Harrison tells me that he maintained that there are only three instances of Immersion in the Scriptures—the drowning of the sinners at the Flood, the overwhelming of the Egyptians in the Red Sea at the Exodus, and the plunge of the Gadarene swine! What about Jonah?

⁹ p. 219.

¹⁰ Gregory, *Side-lights*, pp. 358f.

room"—that is, the publishing house under the control of the Conference—issued a series of threepenny tracts in reply to the famous Tracts of the Oxford Movement. These were entitled "Wesleyan Tracts for the Times," and the eighth took the subject "Baptism Not Regeneration."

On the other hand there were those, sometimes led by Bunting himself, who began to cry "Halt!" In 1838, for instance, the Tractarian Controversy "came up" in Conference, and Bunting said, "We are in danger of going to the opposite extreme," and appealed to the article on Baptism in the Wesleyan Catechism.¹¹ And, as we have seen, the Conference of 1840 directed that either the Anglican Form or Wesley's Abridgement should be used in the Baptismal Service. This is the more remarkable because the famous "Gedney Case," in which a Lincolnshire clergyman refused to bury any one baptised by a Methodist, fell in that year.¹²

What was the ground of this seeming vacillation? It was in part due to the fact that many Methodists, like Wesley before them, wished to do two things at once—to keep as close as possible to the Church of England, and to expound doctrine in accordance with the great Evangelical proclamation of "assurance." Sometimes these two endeavours pulled them in opposite directions. When this was so, slowly but surely the belief in "assurance" won. Yet, in the case of Baptism, there was something more. The article in the Catechism to which Bunting appealed uses the famous old phrase that Baptism is a "means of grace." In other words, while Baptismal Regeneration was repudiated, it was believed that in Baptism a child receives *some* spiritual blessing which an unbaptised child does not receive. It will be seen that this doctrine, while it silently omits Wesley's account of this blessing—that in Baptism "the guilt of original sin" is taken away—is still a modified form of his belief. It was the doctrine held both by Richard Watson and Dr. W. B. Pope, and these are the two chief systematic theologians of Methodism in the Nineteenth Century. I do not myself hold it, but, as my business just now is to describe and not to discuss, I will only add that it is still widely held in Methodism. It is quite a mistake to confuse it with Baptismal Regeneration. As we have seen, the distinction was made quite early. None the less, so reluctant was the Conference to draw further away from the Church of England, that the Form for Infant Baptism was not revised till 1882. In that year a Form was adopted that followed as far as possible the Anglican "use" but avoided everything

¹¹ Gregory, *Side-lights*, pp. 256f.

¹² The Wesleyan "Committee of Privileges" carried the issue to the Courts and won.

that could possibly be interpreted as Baptismal Regeneration. In consequence two Ministers, one of them a Tutor at Richmond, left Methodism and entered the Anglican Church.

Yet, while the doctrine just described was the dominant one in Wesleyan Methodism through the greater part of the nineteenth century, another began to intrude. Its best-known exponents did not belong to Methodism. Perhaps its most famous exposition is in F. W. Robertson's two Sermons on Baptism, but it had other advocates in Maurice, Kingsley and Dr. Dale. Under this belief every child born into the world is God's child, and baptism only asserts this. As Dale put it, it is a "declaratory act." There was a favourite comparison with the coronation of an English king—this, says Robertson, does not *make* him king, but asserts that he *is* king. These teachers said much else, of course, but this is the new point in their teaching, and they make much—but not too much, as I think—of the value of such "declaratory acts." It may be that this doctrine, at least in part, was a reaction against the emphasis of the Oxford Movement on Baptismal Regeneration. For evidence of the spread of this interpretation among Methodist Ministers we may turn to Gregory's *Scriptural Church Principles*, published in 1888. He is at pains both to repudiate Baptismal Regeneration and to combat Maurice and Robertson's teaching.¹³ He would not spend so much time as he does over the latter, I think, unless it had got some hold in Methodism. Since his day it has spread widely—with an addition. Its exponents insist that, if Baptism is rightly used, it is a true and effective "Means of grace" *to the child's parents and to the Church*. Not only does it remind them of their high duties to the child, but in and through it Christ gives them grace for the fulfilment of those duties. This, of course, is only to say of Baptism what Christians say of all true "Means of grace." Many who like myself hold this doctrine would add that both good and evil—in old technical terms "prevenient grace" and "original sin"—are at work in every child from birth, but that, unless and until he himself sides with evil, good predominates. So a basis is found for the belief, common among Methodists, that *every* child that dies "enters into the kingdom of heaven."

There are, then, two concepts of Baptism in Methodism to-day. The Conference of the United Church has appointed a Committee to draw up a Form of Service and also "a Memorandum of Infant Baptism for the future guidance of the Church." This Committee has not yet finally reported and it remains to be seen what the Conference will do with its report, but its constant endeavour is to draw up such a Form and such

¹³ pp. 42-65.

a Memorandum as shall be acceptable to those who hold either of the doctrines described above. It is perhaps hardly necessary to add that Methodists, rightly or wrongly, still adhere steadfastly to the practice of Infant Baptism. They do so because they believe, not only that children belong to Christ and therefore to His Church, but because they think that Baptism is His appointed way of proclaiming this. Perhaps a quotation from the last-named book of Dr. Gregory relates this conviction to their belief in "assurance" as well as any. The book is in catechetical form, and the author says¹⁴ "Baptism, then, is initiation into discipleship. Is it also initiation into Church membership?" The answer begins, "Not into *full* membership in the case of an infant, but into incipient and provisional Church membership. To *full* Church membership free personal consent is indispensable."¹⁵

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¹⁴ p. 37.

¹⁵ The writer may perhaps be allowed to add that he has fully expounded his own concept of the Sacramental principle in his Fernley Lecture on "The Sacramental Society."

PLYMOUTH. The records of the church are meagre for half a century. Josiah Thompson in 1779 made some notes which are here expanded. Nathanael Hodges, of Warren's academy at Taunton, was pastor 1698-1701, then left for London, when Samuel Buttall resumed his care of the church. In 1707 Caleb Jope was invited from Davisson's Baptist academy at Trowbridge, and the Western Association approved; but he proceeded to Jones' academy at Tewkesbury, to qualify as tutor at the Bristol academy. So Plymouth at once called John Bryan, though he was not ordained till 1710. John Bennick followed, 1718-1720, then Caleb Jope did come till 1723. Elkanah Widgery from Newbury spent two years, then on to Bampton. John Ridley was next, 1726-1730, and after a short stay in London settled at Ingham. Abraham Deodate Hoare was pastor 1734-1739 at least. Then John Bennick took office again, but about 1747 went to Lyme. The way then opened for Philip Gibbs from Kingsbridge, who set the church on a good footing, and they rebuilt the premises in 1752, a century after the first building.