

Professor Oscar Cullmann on Baptism

CULLMANN'S *Die Tauflehre des Neuen Testaments* (of which *Baptism in the New Testament*, published by the S.C.M. Press at 6s., is the English translation) first appeared in Zurich in 1948. It was intended as a reply to Karl Barth's *Die Kirchliche Lehre von der Taufe* (E.T., *The Teaching of the Church regarding Baptism*, S.C.M. Press, 1948, 2s. 6d.), and has been hailed by paedo-baptists with an eagerness that betokens the anxiety widely felt amongst them. There can be no question that it is an important contribution to the vexed question with which it deals. Cullmann regards Barth's attack upon infant baptism as the most effective and searching that has ever been made, either from within the main Christian tradition or from the ranks of those whose churches practise believers' baptism. In his view the attack must be met by New Testament scholars or the whole position is lost.

Like Barth, Cullmann accepts *Romans vi.* as the fundamental passage for an understanding of the Christian rite of baptism. Christian baptism is rooted in the death and resurrection of Jesus. How are these to be understood? Cullmann's exposition starts from the baptism of Jesus by John. This represented, according to the Swiss scholar, our Lord's acceptance of the roll of the Suffering Servant, as set forth in the prophecies of Isaiah, one taking upon himself the sins of his people. To be baptised meant for Jesus to suffer and to die for His people. This view is confirmed, in Cullmann's opinion, by the only two occasions on which, according to the Synoptic tradition, Jesus used the word "baptise." "Are ye able to be baptised with the the baptism that I am baptised with?" (*Mark x.* 38). "I have a baptism to be baptised with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished" (*Luke xii.* 50). In both these passages, says Cullmann, Jesus equates His baptism with His death. But—and here it is that Cullmann reaches the crucial point of his exposition, here it is that he tries to turn the flank of Barth's attack on the baptism of infants—Jesus by His death accomplishes a general baptism "once for all and for all." "It belongs to the essence of this general baptism effected by Jesus, that it is completely independent of the decision of faith and understanding

of those who benefit from it" (p. 20). Christian baptism, as employed after Pentecost by the Church, was not a return to John's baptism, but a baptism into Christ's death and resurrection.

When Cullmann comes to consider more closely what is meant by baptism as reception into the Body of Christ, he argues that the New Testament gives us no clear evidence either for or against the view that children were baptised (p. 24). Theory and practice must be based, therefore, on one's general view of what the baptismal teaching of the New Testament implies. There was, he thinks, a distinction made from the very beginning between children born after the conversion of their parents and those born before. This had been the case with Jewish proselyte baptism. When Gentiles desired acceptance into Judaism, their children had to be submitted to proselyte baptism. Those born later were not baptised; they were reckoned as made holy by their parents. Cullmann cites 1 *Cor. vii. 14* as a Christian analogy, and claims that there is actually less evidence in the New Testament for the baptism of the grown sons and daughters of Christian parents than there is for the baptism of infants (p. 26).

In passing, one is inclined to ask whether this argument from silence is really more than a clever debating point, since we have so few personal or family details about those who made up the early Church, and we are dealing in the main with the literature prepared by the first Christian generation. The New Testament presumes that all the members of the Church have been baptised. Moreover, both Continental and British Old Testament and Rabbinic scholars advise great caution in drawing analogies and arguments from proselyte baptism. There are strong grounds for thinking that it was only in the first century A.D. that it took its place beside circumcision and, in that case, it is very unlikely to have determined Christian practice.¹

To return to Cullmann's argument, however. He thinks that Barth is too much under the influence of the twentieth century situation and the difficulties now facing national and confessional churches. It is more important to determine the true New Testament doctrine of baptism. Cullmann admits that in apostolic times baptism was the occasion for giving expression to the profession or confession of faith of the candidate. He does not however, draw from this the conclusion that this aspect or element is necessarily involved in baptism, or that personal faith and confession are inseparably bound up with a meaningful and correct baptismal practice (p. 28). Though he admits that faith is necessarily related to baptism, he does not agree that it must be present at the moment of the baptismal

¹ Nor that of John. Cp. W. Michaelis, 1949 (quoted by Jeremias).

act itself. Both baptism and the Lord's Supper are sacraments of the death and resurrection of Christ. The one places the individual within the fellowship where these acts of God may become operative for him; it is unrepeatable. The other is to be constantly repeated by believers, as the rite separating them from unbelievers and from those not yet capable of faith. Cullmann argues that in *I Cor. xii. 13* ("For in one Spirit were we all baptised into one body") and *Gal. iii. 27-28* ("For as many of you as were baptised into Christ did put on Christ") the candidate is "the passive object of a divine act, that he is there really set within the Body of Christ by God" (p. 31). The German is: "dass er passive object dieses göttlichen Handelns ist, dass er von Gott eingeordnet wird," (German p. 26). He compares those who "were added" (*Acts ii. 41*) to the Church on the day of Pentecost. Faith is, for Cullmann, the resulting answer to God's act, not its pre-condition. Faith must follow baptism or its divine gifts are disdained and outraged, its fruits annulled; but faith is the result of a man's incorporation into the fellowship of the Church, not its cause (p. 33.) Cullmann rejects the view, which has often been held, that the faith necessary for the legitimating of the rite of baptism is present vicariously in the sponsors or in the Church as a whole. Faith must of course be present in the praying congregation (p. 54), but what is of greater importance is the presence of the Holy Spirit, which is what really makes it a Church (p. 43). Baptism, then, for Cullmann, is not bound up at all with personal decision. Like circumcision, it is the seal set by God on His Covenant with His people as a whole. Cullmann is prepared to describe Christian baptism as the fulfilment or completion (*erfüllung*) of circumcision and proselyte baptism (p. 70).

In further discussion of the relationship of faith to baptism, Cullmann places considerable emphasis on *1 Cor. x. 1f.* where Paul applies the term baptism to the passage of the Israelites through the Red Sea.² He emphasises also the importance of marriage and the Christian family. Christian parentage cannot guarantee the faith which must later be manifested by the child himself, but it is a godly demonstration of or pointer towards faith. In the case of adult converts from heathenism or Judaism, it may be right to say that faith leads to baptism. In the case of those growing up under Christian influences, baptism may be said to lead to faith (p. 54). A minor point of interest in Cullmann's discussion is his suggestion, first made in 1937, that the words "Forbid them not (*Μὴ κωλύετε, Luke xviii, 16*), which Luke puts into the mouth of Jesus when young children

² Cp. Kummel, *Theol. Rundschau*, 1950, pp. 40f. for critical comments on Cullmann's line of interpretation.

were brought to Him, may have reference to baptism and may find an echo in the earliest baptismal liturgies (Cp. *Acts viii*, 36, *x*. 47, *xi*. 17, *Mark x*. 13-14). This is approved by Joachim Jeremias in *Hat die Urkirche die Kindertaufe geubt?* 1938, ²1949).

Cullmann's arguments have been summarised somewhat fully, and as fairly as possible, for his name is being widely invoked by paedobaptists and his standing as a New Testament scholar demands that what he says be most carefully weighed. His is an interesting and ingenious argument. We fail to find it convincing for the following reasons:—

(1) It turns on a doubtful linking of *Mark x*. 38 and *Luke xii*, 50 with our Lord's understanding of His baptism by John, and the interpretation of the latter and of His death as a "general baptism." Such an approach at best reads into a metaphor far more than is really legitimate.³

(2) It depends on the doctrinal separation from baptism of the element of personal confession and faith, which Cullmann himself has to admit is present in the majority, if not all, the instances of baptism recorded in the New Testament.

(3) It rests to a considerable extent on a strained exegesis of *1 Cor. xii*. 13, *Gal. iii*. 27 and *Acts ii*. 41. If the line of argument adopted in regard to the reference to baptism in *1 Cor. xii*. 13 is correct and the stress there is on God's act to the exclusion of the human response, then surely this must also apply to the second part of the verse—"and have all been made to drink into one Spirit." But in that case there falls to the ground the distinction between baptism and the Lord's Supper, which Cullmann tries to establish. With regard to *Gal. iii*. 27, the immediately preceding verse—"For ye are all the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ"—seems to us to rule out Cullmann's interpretation. His use of the word *hinzugetan* ("were added, *προσθεθήσαν*) from *Acts ii*. 41 appears to the writer entirely arbitrary and unjustifiable.

(4) At several points Cullmann's argument seems to prove too much. If he is right, why should the children of Christian parents ever have been baptised? Why should the Church have adopted this practice, if *1 Cor. vii*. 14 means all that Cullmann suggests? As a matter of fact the passage deals with the children of mixed marriages of believers and unbelievers and has nothing whatever to do with the question of infant baptism.

(5) These and other difficulties seem to follow from a strange

³ But note that Alan Richardson, *Science, History and Faith*, 1950, p. 117 connects these passages with *Romans vi*. and carries back to Jesus Himself the reinterpretation and enriching of John's baptism of repentance. "Through baptism into Christ's death the New Israel recapitulates the exodus of the Old Israel through baptism in the Red Sea." (Cp. *Luke 9*, 31.)

by-passing of John's baptism which has surely far more to do as a foreshadowing and prelude to Christian baptism than either circumcision or proselyte baptism. One of the most important characteristics of John's baptism—decisively and deliberately separating it from circumcision—was that it was a "baptism of repentance." There seems no evidence that the early Church intended to abandon personal penitence—or that it ought to have done so.

(6) Cullmann avoids any reference to the situation which has arisen in churches practising infant baptism just because they have taken the line that personal understanding and faith are not constitutive elements of the rite. The present situation suggests that something is wrong. It is this which has driven Barth and Brunner, and many others, to ask whether the response of the candidate is not an essential factor in New Testament baptism. Even those unwilling to go as far as this, might be led, on Cullmann's own principles, to ask whether at the present time most of those who are baptised ought not to be treated as the heathen and the Jews were, in his view, in apostolic times, and the order restored; faith leading to baptism.

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An article by Rev. H. Lismer Short shows how important was the seventeenth century in Unitarian history, and states that Unitarians are still fundamentally children of that age. Dr. Dorothy Tarrant writes on the connection of Bedford College with Unitarianism. The founder of the College, Elisabeth Reid, was the daughter of William Sturch (1753-1838) who came of a line of General Baptist ministers. Items from a diary, identified as that of Charles James Darbishire, a Bolton layman and benefactor of Owens College (now the University) Manchester, are reproduced by the editor, Dr. McLachlan. Sidelights on chapel-going in the early nineteenth century are provided by extracts from the diary of Samuel Mason, a Prestwich farmer.