

Baptism and Circumcision.

IN the active reconsideration of baptism which is going on in Paedo-Baptist circles great emphasis is being laid upon the argument from circumcision in justification of infant baptism. For example the findings of the Oxford Conference of Evangelical Churchmen on "Baptism Today" (*The Times* May 31st, 1950) include the statement: "Infant baptism, following naturally from the admission of children into the old covenant by circumcision, also fully accords with the principle of the covenant of grace." W. F. Flemington in *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism* (1948, p. 62) writes: "What circumcision meant under the Old Dispensation that, and no less, is the meaning of baptism for those living in the New Age."

Many, though by no means all, of the writers are now inclined to grant us the argument from the New Testament, so far at any rate as explicit references are concerned. But they argue that the New Testament must be read in the light of its Jewish antecedents. Baptists, they say, turn apostles into nineteenth century Englishmen with liberal and individualistic beliefs, and read their New Testaments on that assumption, ignoring the corporate conceptions behind Jewish thought. Baptists, it is said, never refer to the Old Testament in their discussions of Baptism and "forget that both our Lord and the apostles were brought up in the Jewish faith" (Rev. Frank Colquhoun, *Record* 26.11.43). That is why according to Mr. Colquhoun in *The Record* (15.8.47), Baptist "tenets appeal so strongly to simple folk who have little or no insight into the great Biblical principles concerning the Church and the Covenant and do not want to be bothered with such considerations as the continuity of the new Israel with the old. That is why the Baptist movement is making such rapid progress among people who do not possess great intellectual depth and whose knowledge of the Bible as a whole is decidedly limited." If the Bible began with *Matthew*, "then indeed there would be little Scriptural justification for the practice of infant baptism." It is not a question of citing proof texts from the New Testament, but of establishing the scriptural principle concerning the relation of the children of believing parents to the Covenant and the Church. Baptists teach that "the child, though dedicated, is still outside the Church. He cannot be regarded as

a disciple. Yet if this is true, then it means that the child of Christian parents today is worse off than the child of Jewish parents two thousand years ago! It means that the New Covenant is inferior to the Old with regard to the position and privileges it assigns to infants! That is the logical and inescapable deduction to be drawn from the Baptist hypothesis." (Colquhoun, *Record* 26.11.43). (Some paedo-baptists argue that the children of believing parents ought to be baptised because they are already within the covenant of grace; others, because it is only by baptism that they can be brought into it. Mr. Colquhoun apparently holds the latter view.)

An unsigned article in *The Record* on "The Order of Baptism: Towards an Evangelical Solution" says: "The starting point when we turn to the teaching of Scripture is naturally the practice of circumcision. . . . By the ceremony of circumcision the infant child was received into the family of the Chosen People, it was brought into the Covenant, and unless it was circumcised it was cut off from the covenant mercies. . . . The parents had most solemn obligations to teach and train their children, and it was followed in later years by a ceremony corresponding to our confirmation. When we seek to apply the principle to baptism we must remember that in O.T. times God was dealing with a nation; in N.T. times God is dealing with the Church. That surely is one of the fundamental mistakes in our Anglican practice, that we treat the nation as a church, a viewpoint which finds no justification in the New Testament. . . . It is essential that only children shall be baptised whose parents are members of the household of faith and will bring their children up in the faith. . . . When we turn to the New Testament, although we find no direct teaching on infant baptism, the only teaching we can justly claim is agreeable to the institution of Christ is the baptism of the children of the household of faith." Then follow references to household baptisms and to 1 *Cor. vii. 14*.

A similar approach is made in *Baptism in the Church* by J. R. S. Taylor, Bishop of Sodor and Man, and F. J. Taylor. (Church Book Room, p. 12). They are puzzled by the silence of the New Testament regarding infant baptism and say that "it is difficult to determine what significance to attach to this silence. It may be that the incorporation of infants into Israel was so familiar a fact that it never seemed to call for special comment. A great deal of the difficulty which occurs in any discussion of this part of the subject arises from the intense individualism of later Western theology and the failure to recognise the corporate context of the Christian life. The primary reference of baptism is not to individual salvation, but to the relation of the individual to Christ in His body the Church. . . . Thus baptism is to be

regarded as circumcision (*Col. ii. 11-13; Gal. iii. 29*) was in the old dispensation as the divine method of recruitment for the Church." In *The Churchman* (March 1948), Mr. Musgrave Brown writes: "The presumption drawn from the analogy of the two covenants is that they (the children of Christians) would be baptised, and therefore if the analogy was not to hold good a definite statement to that effect might have been expected." H. G. Marsh in *The Origin and Significance of New Testament Baptism* (p. 192 and elsewhere) is much more cautious in his assertions, but points in the same direction.

The latest to join in the discussion, provoked by Karl Barth's attack on infant baptism, is Oscar Cullman in *La Baptême des enfants* (Delachaux and Nestlé; E.V. *Baptism in the New Testament* translated by J. K. S. Reid, S.C.M. Press). Unlike those referred to above, he bases his position on the New Testament. Let us try to summarise his argument, reserving comment till later.

Infant baptism as the fulfilment of circumcision is explicit in *Col. ii. 11* and implicit in *Rom. ii. 25ff, iv. 1ff., Gal. iii. 6ff., Ephes. ii. 11ff.* There is a correspondence at every point between the act of admission to the Old Covenant and the act of admission to the New. Barth says that circumcision meant only admission to a natural succession, while for Christian baptism the prerequisite is individual faith. But this does not agree with Paul's understanding of circumcision. According to *Rom. iv. 11ff.* it was given to Abraham as the seal of righteousness obtained by faith in the promise that he should become father of many peoples, not merely of the Jewish people. In *Gal. iv. 21f.* Paul shows that the principle of natural succession did not hold for Isaac. Christians are inheritors of the promise to Isaac. (*Gal. iv. 28*). Circumcision thus looks to the incorporation of the Gentiles in the Covenant and we cannot see in it only admission to a natural succession.

Again, properly understood, circumcision is not only external and made with hands (*Ephes. ii. 11. Col. ii. 11*), but is a circumcision of the heart (*Rom. ii. 29*) and is directly continued in baptism, which is the circumcision of Christ (*Col. ii. 11*). That is the argument of *Rom. iv. 1ff.* and *Gal. iii. 6*. Abraham is thus father of the members of the Church of Christ, not by virtue of natural descent, but by the divine plan of salvation. Circumcision is the seal of a covenant open to all peoples. Through the unfaithfulness of Israel the nations were not actually brought in, but that does not remove the essential meaning of circumcision, which is universalist in intention.

In the New Testament times the Jewish mission to the Gentiles was on a large scale, and pagan adult proselytes were first circum-

cised, and then underwent a bath of purification in proselyte baptism. John the Baptist introduced a revolutionary novelty by demanding that Jews, and not only Gentile proselytes, should be baptised. That was the first step in the passage from circumcision to baptism. The children of proselytes, born before their conversion, were baptised at the same time as their parents, though children born afterwards were not. One must agree with Grossmann that the New Testament would contain an explicit instruction against infant baptism if the Church had not practiced it.

There is no incompatibility between infant baptism and John's baptism because he demanded repentance. He was concerned with a missionary situation. His ministry did not last long enough for the question of later born children of converts to arise. But Paul in 1 *Cor. vii.*, 14 follows the Jewish practice in dispensing them from baptism. That is what is meant by the children of Christians being "holy" from birth. They already belonged to the Covenant because one of their parents did. But Christians could not rest in that position. Christian baptism was the fulfilment not only of the bath of purification, but also of circumcision so far as that signified admission to the people of God. Just as Judaism did not baptise the sons of proselytes already "holy" by birth, but did circumcise them, so the Church must seal children "holy" by birth by the seal of baptism, which was able in the nature of the case to include female as well as male.

John the Baptist demanded only baptism because he was addressing those circumcised already. They must purify themselves anew by baptism (*Matt. iii.* 7). But his baptism, like circumcision, was an act of admission to the people of God awaiting the fulfilment of the promises. Christian baptism thus unites the content of circumcision and John's baptism: it introduces into the Church and it purifies.

So far we have been trying to give a faithful, though necessarily condensed, account of Cullmann's argument so far as it concerns circumcision. (For a discussion of other aspects of Cullmann's book see article by Dr. E. A. Payne in *The Baptist Quarterly*, April 1951). Now we have to ask ourselves as Baptists what weight ought to be given to these arguments.

We may legitimately derive some quiet amusement from Mr. Colquhoun's picture of us as simple and unscholarly and deficient in Biblical knowledge. No doubt many of us are, but we have not been—and are not—without Old Testament scholars of some international repute. At least one of these, Wheeler Robinson, devoted himself not only to producing books of outstanding worth in Old Testament scholarship, but also to the exposition of the

Baptist position. It was certainly not ignorance of the Old Testament that made *him* a Baptist.

Nevertheless it must be admitted that in our statement of the Baptist position in the last generation or two we have mostly left these questions of the Covenant and circumcision out of the argument. We have tended to forget the Old Testament background of the New Testament and we have sometimes been too individualistic in our conceptions of salvation, baptism and church membership. That charge could not have been brought against many of our fathers. For example, Adoniram Judson in his famous exposition of his Baptist views, acquired after much study and painful thought, devotes a large part of his space to such questions. (*A sermon on the nature and subjects of Christian Baptism*). Isaac Hinton in a once well-known *History of Baptism* (1864) has a lengthy chapter on circumcision and baptism.

We must also admit that there is more to be said for the existence of proselyte baptism in New Testament times than many scholars, Baptists and non-Baptists, have been prepared to recognise. The evidence is not clear, but it has been established with a high degree of probability that proselyte baptism was practised before the time of Christ; if only because it is very difficult to imagine Judaism copying it from Christianity. John the Baptist's innovation was in extending baptism to Jews as well as proselytes. The main facts about proselyte baptism appear to be that (a) it followed circumcision; (b) the method was self immersion; (c) it was administered to convinced and instructed converts; but (d) children of proselytes born before their parents' conversion (and only those) were also baptised; (e) it achieved levitical purification and marked a break with the old life, "a new birth" in the language of the Rabbis. We can certainly no longer dismiss proselyte baptism out of hand in considering the origins of New Testament baptism.

As for the elaborate argument concerning circumcision, with the corollary that infant baptism should be the Christian practice, we must still assert that it has no sound biblical basis, whether in the Old Testament or the New. It is an after thought. "Here is infant baptism. How are we to justify it since it is not explicitly supported in the New Testament?" Given its existence, it is possible to find all kinds of interesting analogies with the practice of circumcision, though it is an analogy which the New Testament for obvious reasons never draws. Circumcision and infant baptism are both administered to infants, though circumcision only to males. Both are regarded by those who practice them as recording, or perhaps even as being the instrument of, the admission of those infants to a community. But the difficulty

is that the New Testament never says that baptism is the entrance to the New Covenant as circumcision is to the Old, though there are many occasions on which it would have been natural and even imperative to say so.

It would have been a knock-out blow—if we may use such an expression—in the Judaizing controversy which so sorely troubled the early Church. Though the Judaizing teachers complained that circumcision was not enforced on Gentile converts, the Jerusalem Council (Acts xv. 1-20) does not point to the substitution of baptism, which would have been a complete answer. Nor in the letter to the Galatians, which is written expressly to meet the influence of these teachers, does Paul drop the slightest hint that baptism for the Christian is the equivalent of circumcision. How easily could the apostles have ended the whole dispute: These Gentiles Converts received Christian circumcision when they were baptised, and therefore it is unnecessary for them to be circumcised. But there is no trace of any such statement in all the discussion.

Again, the practice of the apostolic Church does not support the idea that baptism takes the place of circumcision. It is natural, perhaps, that circumcised Jews on becoming Christians should be baptised. But apparently Christian Jews were encouraged to continue the practice of circumcising their children. More remarkable still, Timothy was circumcised at Paul's bidding after his baptism—an incomprehensible act if the apostle believed that baptism had taken the place of circumcision.

The argument from *1 Cor. vii. 12-14*, if it has anything at all to do with the subject, which is very doubtful, would surely apply to the unbelieving husband or wife as much as to unbelieving children. The Apostle says they are all "sanctified" (whatever that means in this context) by the believing partner. Cullmann, with some others, holds as we have seen, that it actually means that such children should *not* be baptised! It is much more likely that the passage is a pronouncement that such a "mixed marriage" from the Christian point of view is lawful and should continue. This seems borne out by the discussion in *1 Thess. iv. 1-7*, where the same word for "sanctify" is used. When Paul writes at length about circumcision and the relation of the Old Covenant to the New in *Romans iv.* he is surely not interpreting circumcision from the Christian point of view, as Cullmann maintains, so much as putting it in its place. His whole point is that circumcision of the heart involving repentance and faith, is what matters, and not any rite at all, whether circumcision or, as he might well have added, baptism (*Rom. ii. 29; Gal. vi. 15*). In the record of the covenant with Abraham in *Gen. xvi. 1-14*, the main emphasis is on the conveyance of Canaan to Abraham's

descendants, who were to be attested as such by circumcision, which would ensure them a place within the national covenant. Cullmann is surely pressing the plural "nations" in *Gen. vii. 4*, in Rabbinic fashion, far beyond what it will bear. He makes it a statement of the universality of God's purposes. That universality is happily a glorious fact. But all this verse can be held to mean is the inclusion of "the Arab tribes descended from Ishmael, and from Abram's sons by Keturah, Edom (Esau) and Israel" (so W. H. Bennett. *ad loc.*). But cf. *Gen. xii. 3*.

Abraham, Paul reminds his readers, entered the covenant of grace, not by circumcision, but by obedience to God's call to leave Ur of the Chaldees. Faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness, "not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision: and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while he was in uncircumcision: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be in uncircumcision" (*Rom. iv. 9-11*). In other words circumcision could be a seal of the covenant of grace only where faith already existed. Circumcision followed and did not precede the faith of Abraham. For his descendants the rite was merely a mark of national separation, "a ritual tribal mark" as Bennett puts it.

"It (circumcision) was nothing more than a ratification of Abraham's faith. Faith was the real motive power; and as applied to the present condition of things, Abraham's faith in the promise had its counterpart in the Christian's faith in the fulfilment of the promise (i.e. in Christ). . . . The true descendants of Abraham were not so much those who imitated his circumcision (i.e. all Jews, whether believing or not), but those who imitated his faith (i.e. believing Jews and believing Gentiles)" (Sanday and Headlam *Rom. ad loc.*) In short, in the Christian dispensation faith takes the place of circumcision. That is hardly an argument for the baptism of infants, who, in the nature of things, cannot exercise faith.

E. F. Scott writing on the passage says that "Paul argues in the Rabbinical manner, deducing a large principle from an incidental hint in scripture, but the principle, however, he arrives at it, is unquestionably true. The forms of religion have value only in so far as they express a heart-felt conviction. Prior to any forms there must be the trust in God, the desire to know and serve Him. So it is with Abraham, and so it must be with everyman whose religion is worth anything" (*Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 40) cf. also *Galatians iii. 6-7*.

And is it not surprising from the point of view we are discussing, that the writer to the Hebrews devoting himself mainly to this very topic of the relation of the Covenants should have nothing at all to say about this alleged replacement of circumcision

by baptism? Instead, like Paul, he has much to say about faith.

In his *Aids to Reflection*, S. T. Coleridge, after dismissing the argument for infant baptism from the baptisms of households, writes: "Equally vain is the pretended analogy from circumcision, which was no sacrament at all, but the means and mark of national distinction, nor was it ever pretended that any grace was conferred with it or that the rite was significant of any inward or spiritual operation."

The only passage in the New Testament where circumcision and baptism are mentioned together is *Col. ii. 11-12*, a passage on which those we are discussing lay great weight, but it is a rickety foundation for their argument. Paul tells his readers that they do not need the circumcision of the flesh, because they have received the circumcision of the heart, of which the bodily rite of circumcision is the type. (cf. *Deut. xxx. 6*, "The Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart." See also *Jer. iv. 4*; *ix. 25*; *Deut. x. 16*.) What is put in the place of the old circumcision is not baptism, but this inward and spiritual circumcision. Baptism follows upon this change of heart. Lightfoot (*ad loc*) says: "The distinguishing features of this higher circumcision are threefold: (1) It is not external, but inward, not made with hands, but wrought by the Spirit. (2) It divests not of a part only of the flesh, but of the whole body of carnal affections. (3) It is the circumcision not of Moses or of the patriarchs, but of Christ." This circumcision of the heart, "not made with the hands" clearly cannot be identified with the baptism of believers, still, less with infant baptism. Yet, as Lightfoot points out, the series of aorists suggests that the new circumcision should be regarded as taking place at the moment of baptism. Paul cannot be identifying the spiritual circumcision with any outward rite, not only because of his explicit statement here, but in the light of his total teaching. It seems that faith and spiritual cleansing are in his mind so inseparately wedded with baptism that he here speaks of them as one. The reference to faith in verse 12, and the verses that follow make it clear that he cannot at least be speaking of infant baptism.¹

The practice, much favoured by a certain school of mainly Anglo-Catholic scholars, of a revived typology which finds New Testament analogies for Old Testament events, officials and practices is a very dangerous one. It is argued that "there *must* be a close analogy between the way of admission into the old Covenant and the way of admission into the New." "Analogy" is not the right word for the relation between the Old Testament

¹ A. S. Peake (*Expositors Greek Testament*) and Marsh (*op. cit.* p. 192) agree in this interpretation of the passage.

and the New. Of course the Bible does not begin with Matthew's Gospel. God's eternal purpose of human redemption goes far back before New Testament times. The main stream of His revelation of Himself runs through the Abrahamic Covenant and His historic dealings with Israel, which was, as Athanasius put it, "the sacred school of the knowledge of God for all mankind." But as the great prophets saw—notably Jeremiah—the old covenant based upon physical descent from Abraham must give way to a new spiritual covenant, written on the heart and not on tables of stone. And in that new covenant, as again the greatest of the prophets saw, notably second Isaiah, the other nations were to have their share. Israel rejected the divine calling, and Jesus, the Messiah, the one who accepted and incarnated the divine purpose, had to begin again by building on the faith of Peter and his fellows. The Christian Church was a new beginning, and yet it was the continuation of the old purpose.

There is thus a close relationship between the two Covenants. But the contrasts are as notable as the similarities. "Ye have heard" said Jesus, "But I say unto you." It is certainly not legitimate to take all the features in the Old Covenant and insist that there *must* be some similar rite or practice or belief in the New. And, as this article has tried to show, the attempt to prove that infant baptism must exist in the New Covenant because circumcision was there in the Old, is not convincing.

According to Paul, the sacrament of baptism is a representation of the burial and resurrection of Christ and of the incorporation of the believer into Christ by dying to the past and rising again to a new life in Him: at once an acted parable and a means of grace. There is no true analogy at any point between this baptism and circumcision, and the New Testament gives no hint that the one has taken the place of the other. Circumcision was one thing and baptism is quite another.

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Of particular interest to Baptists in the *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, October, 1951, is an article by Dr. J. McLachlan on Thomas Collier (1634-1691) the liberal-minded Superintendent of the Western Association, and the reproduction of a letter written by the General Baptist, Benjamin Marten (1769-1823) of Barfreton, Dover.