

Some Recent Trends in the Theology of Baptism

(Continued)

INFANT BAPTISM OR BELIEVER'S BAPTISM

First, we must direct our attention to baptism in the New Testament. By far the majority of recent writers are convinced that baptism in the New Testament is the baptism of believers, and some even go so far as to maintain that no other form of baptism is known there. Writers who have taken this view include P. T. Forsyth,⁶⁰ H. W. Robinson,⁶¹ H. G. Marsh,⁶² F. J. Leenhardt,⁶³ and J. R. Nelson.⁶⁴ Others agree that there is no New Testament evidence for infant baptism but yet feel that it is quite likely that such a practice took place even in apostolic days. E. J. Bicknell⁶⁵ is one who maintains that this is true, but he also declares that not only Scripture but the language of the Prayer Book and of Article XXVII of the Church of England are concerned with adult baptism and are applicable in their fullest sense only when applied to adults; to apply them to infants, he says, means that they require accommodation to new conditions. If Bicknell's main assertion is true, however, it is difficult to see how such can be the case.

The reasons for holding to the view that infant baptism was practised from the earliest times are principally three: (a) Bicknell⁶⁶ argues it on the grounds that the conditions of the apostolic church were very similar to those of the mission field and on the mission field, then as now, adult baptism was the rule and infant baptism the exception. But, at most, this is an argument from silence and we cannot really go further than P. T. Forsyth⁶⁷ who points out that in view of the missionary nature of the early church it is only to be expected that adult baptism should predominate. Besides, W. Machin⁶⁸ has made it clear for us that even on the mission field whenever a family is converted the whole

⁶⁰ *The Church and the Sacraments*, p. 211.

⁶¹ *Baptist Principles*, p. 7.

⁶² *The Origin and Significance of the New Testament Baptism*, p. 174.

⁶³ "Pédobaptisme catholique et Pédobaptisme réformé" in *Etudes Théologiques et Religieuses*, vol. 25, (1950), p. 146.

⁶⁴ *The Realm of Redemption*, p. 129.

⁶⁵ *A Theological Introduction to the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England*, p. 473.

⁶⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 474. Cf. H. R. Mackintosh, "Thoughts on Infant Baptism," in *The Expositor*, vol. xiii, pp. 193-203.

⁶⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 212.

⁶⁸ "Baptism and Confirmation," in *Theology*, vol. 49, (1946), p. 190.

family is baptized,⁶⁹ and we are therefore surely right to assume that by analogy the children of the converts in the New Testament ought also to have been baptized with their parents. If they were, why do we not hear of it? But this leads on to the second reason. (b) It is often asserted⁷⁰ that such children were baptized and that they are included in the references to the baptisms of a "household."⁷¹ H. G. Marsh,⁷² for instance, goes so far as to maintain that where we hear of "households" it is impossible to imagine that no children were included in their numbers, but Barth,⁷³ on the other hand, considers this to be no more than "a thin thread" to which one may hold for a proof of infant baptism in the New Testament; even then he reminds his readers of the sequence of Word, Faith and Baptism that is kept in *these* narratives, and questions whether one really wants to hold such a thread. H. Cook,⁷⁴ moreover, makes it clear that in his opinion the possibility of the households referred to containing children is so slight as to be negligible, whilst R. E. White⁷⁵ says that if they were included it would make the practice of the apostles inconsistent with their teaching, and with their appeals to the solemn obligations which the baptized voluntarily accepted. Thus, far from adding to the possibility of infants being baptized, as in a modern missionary church, the evidence from the "household" baptisms seems rather to weaken the case. It should not be thought, however, that advocates of believer's baptism accept this as adequate proof that there was no baptism of infants in New Testament times; silence is no argument for either point of view, whereas believer's baptism has a firm Scriptural foundation on which to stand. (c) A third argument in favour of infant baptism in the New Testament is that it would most naturally be practised on analogy with Jewish proselyte baptism. Flemington⁷⁶ says that if a proselyte had any children when he went over to Judaism it was customary for those children to be circumcised and baptized and admitted as proselytes. This, presumably, Flemington regards as an argument in favour of the children of Christians being baptized when their parents embraced the faith, but then he goes on to say that children born subsequently were not baptized. To meet the argument that the church does baptize children of parents who have already

⁶⁹ This does not apply in the case of the Baptist Missionaries.

⁷⁰ W. F. Flemington, *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*, p. 131.

⁷¹ *Acts* x. 24; xvi. 15, 33; xvii. 8; *I Cor.* i. 6.

⁷² *Op. cit.*, p. 176.

⁷³ *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*, pp. 44-45.

⁷⁴ *What Baptists Stand For*, pp. 107f.

⁷⁵ "Some Important Issues for Baptismal Theology," in *The Expository Times*, vol. lxi., (1949-50), p. 109.

⁷⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 131.

embraced the Christian faith, Flemington then compares infant baptism to circumcision, but by this time the whole argument savours too much of artificiality to be worth of our consideration. It is questionable whether Cullmann⁷⁷ is any more successful in his efforts to reduce the confusion here to order, and E. A. Payne⁷⁸ has drawn attention to some of the dangers of arguing on analogy with Jewish proselyte baptism.

Here we reach the conclusion that the evidence for infant baptism in New Testament, or even apostolic times, is not very strong; at the most it is no more than a possibility, and until further evidence is forthcoming the anti-Paedobaptists can rest content that their views accord most naturally with those of Scripture.

At the same time, it has been equally pointed out, and with much truth, that the New Testament knows nothing of the baptism of adults born of parents already Christian and brought up by them.⁷⁹ Cullmann⁸⁰ observes that chronologically such a case would certainly have been possible in New Testament times, but we hear of none. In reply to this criticism, however, two points may be made. The first is the simple comment from E. A. Payne⁸¹ that we know far too little of family details in the early Church to make such an assertion with any degree of reliability. The second is the abundant evidence for such baptisms at a time nearer to the apostolic age than we know infant baptism to have been regularly practised.

Indeed it seems difficult to determine the date at which infant baptism became the regular mode. P. T. Forsyth⁸² says that it was not until the third century, but William Robinson⁸³ has drawn attention to such great figures as Gregory Nazianzen, Basil the Great, Chrysostom, Ambrose and Augustine, who, in the fourth century, were not baptized until they had reached manhood, although they all had Christian mothers. H. Wheeler Robinson⁸⁴ prefers to date the beginnings of infant baptism as a general practice in the fifth century, and so does the Archbishops' Com-

⁷⁷ *Baptism in the New Testament*, p. 25.

⁷⁸ "Professor Oscar Cullmann On Baptism," in *The Baptist Quarterly*, vol. xiv, (1952), p. 57.

⁷⁹ J. K. S. Reid, "Theological Issues Involved in Baptism," in *The Expository Times*, vol. lxi, (1949-50) p. 202. Cf. R. E. Davies, "Christian Initiation: the Doctrine in the New Testament," in *Friends of Reunion Bulletin*, No. 39, (1951), p. 4; C. T. Craig, *The One Church in the Light of the New Testament*, p. 71.

⁸⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 26.

⁸¹ "Professor Oscar Cullman on Baptism," in *The Baptist Quarterly*, vol. xiv, (1952), p. 57.

⁸² *Op. cit.*, p. 211.

⁸³ *Infant Baptism Today*, p. 8, cf. R. E. White, *loc. cit.*, p. 110.

⁸⁴ *Baptist Principles*, pp. 36f.

mission on "Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion,"⁸⁵ whilst F. J. Leenhardt,⁸⁶ who can scarcely be called anti-Paedobaptist, supplies much evidence to show that the triumph of infant baptism was a slow process. After referring to the already mentioned children of Christian parents who were baptized in manhood even during the fourth century, he then shows how from the fifth to the eighth centuries it was normally infants of two or three years who were the candidates for baptism. The beginning of the regular baptism of babes-in-arms Leenhardt will not date before the eleventh century. Probably the most we can say is that infant baptism began to be practised in the third century, since this is when it met with opposition,⁸⁷ and also when there began to set in a disintegration both of the New Testament doctrine of the seal and of the primitive liturgical pattern,⁸⁸ but it is equally clear that it established itself but slowly. Consequently we have good evidence for the fact that the baptism of adults had a fairly strong hold, even among the Christian families themselves, until quite a late date.

Nevertheless the fact remains that the Church at some stage in her history did make a change from adult baptism, which was most frequently practised in New Testament times, to infant baptism, and most sections of the Church which today practise infant baptism defend it on the grounds that it emphasises the objective givenness of the Gospel of Redemption. "Christ has redeemed all mankind," writes J. S. Whale,⁸⁹ "and the divinely given sign of this fact is baptism. It proclaims that Christ has done something for me, without even consulting me or waiting for my approval." Such has been the view of many recent defenders of infant baptism, including E. J. Bicknell,⁹⁰ W. F. Flemington,⁹¹ O. Cullmann,⁹² R. E. Davies,⁹³ F. C. Tindall,⁹⁴ C. T. Craig,⁹⁵ and the members of the Archbishops' Commission on "Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion."⁹⁶ J. R. Nelson⁹⁷ is one of the few

⁸⁵ *The Theology of Christian Initiation*, p. 14. Cf. F. C. Tindall *Christian Initiation*, p. 10.

⁸⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 149f.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ G. W. H. Lampe, *The Seal of the Spirit*, p. 152.

⁸⁹ *Christian Doctrine*, p. 164.

⁹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 475.

⁹¹ *The New Testament Doctrine of Baptism*, pp. 135ff, and "An Approach to the Theology of Baptism," in *The Expository Times*, vol. lxii, (1950-51), pp. 356-359.

⁹² *Op. cit.*, pp. 20, 49.

⁹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁹⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 79.

⁹⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 21.

⁹⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 130.

who has sought to distinguish clearly between this conception of *gratia praeveniens Dei*, and that which finds its home in the Roman Catholic Church. The Anglican and Free Church doctrine is more concerned with the free and loving initiative of God than with the mechanical effects of the rite itself, and Flemington⁹⁸ expresses the same view when he points out that unless such a baptism is followed by faith it becomes of no value.

Be that as it may, there have been other writers who have put forward different reasons for continuing the practice of infant baptism; Barth,⁹⁹ who is one of the most outstanding, for instance, suggests that there are four: (a) the need which pious parents have of comfort; (b) that the child might be sure of a good upbringing; (c) because believer's baptism seems to be accompanied by certain dangers; (d) it illustrates the antecedent grace of God. Yet, over and above these, Barth questions whether the chief reason is not that today one does not want to renounce the present form of the national Church. Cullmann¹⁰⁰ rejects this view on the grounds that it would be just as easy to say that Barth is pleading for believer's baptism in order to preserve the Confessional nature of the Church, and there is no doubt truth in this assertion. Where Cullmann loses our support, however, is when he goes on to suggest that the question of baptism does not depend on our doctrine of the Church, for to build our doctrine of the Church on either or both of the sacraments seems to many of us like starting with the coping stone instead of the foundations.¹⁰¹

Furthermore, however the Church may defend the change from believer's baptism to infant baptism it is still true that the change has given rise to greater problems.¹⁰² The principal reason for this seems to be that New Testament statements about believers' baptism had been too readily applied to infant baptism without modification,¹⁰³ whereas the baptism of infants cannot bear the whole weight of theological meaning which the New Testament places upon the initiation of adults.¹⁰⁴

O. C. Quick¹⁰⁵ is brave enough to say that he believes that most of the modern difficulties concerning the nature of the sacrament of baptism have arisen because neither the orthodox, nor their

⁹⁸ *Op. cit.*, p. 142.

⁹⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 49f.

¹⁰⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹⁰¹ Cf. H. Cook, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

¹⁰² Not least among these problems of course, is that of the relationship between baptism and faith, which is treated separately.

¹⁰³ Flemington, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

¹⁰⁴ *The Theology of Christian Initiation*, p. 12; cf. P. T. Forsyth, *op. cit.*, pp. 194f.

¹⁰⁵ *The Christian Sacraments*, pp. 168ff.

critics have sufficiently realised that the change from adult baptism to infant baptism as the normal practice of the Church should have involved a shifting of emphasis from the instrumental to the symbolic aspect of the sacrament, and this is certainly one of the problems to which the transference of the rite from adults to infants has given rise. Quick argues that most Christians in the early Church interpreted baptism as an instrumental rite; by it, the old life was left behind and the new life entered upon. When the sacrament was applied to infants, however, the question invariably arose as to the nature of the old life that was left behind, and the answer was found in the doctrine of original sin. Such a doctrine of baptism is, in Quick's opinion, open to objection and hence his view that when it was applied to infants it ought to have been regarded less as an instrumental act and more as a symbolic rite. If the change from adult to infant baptism is justified at all, then it must be accompanied by this change in baptismal theology, and Quick would agree that the emphasis on the symbolic aspect of the sacrament is fundamentally connected with the teaching both of our Lord Himself and of St. Paul. This contribution from Quick has taken an important place in modern discussions on the nature of the rite, though there is still evidence that the problem of the correct emphasis has not been fully dealt with.¹⁰⁶

In quite recent times, a further difficulty has arisen in the problem as to who may be the subjects of baptism, and some scholars have written trenchant criticisms of present day infant baptism. Most notably in this connection are Barth¹⁰⁷ and Brunner,¹⁰⁸ though the work of Leenhardt¹⁰⁹ should never be forgotten. Attention has been drawn, however, to the difference between their views and those of the Baptists¹¹⁰; whereas the Baptists and certain others oppose infant baptism on doctrinal grounds, Brunner and Barth object chiefly on the grounds of the state of Christianity today. It is true that Barth is the more sceptical of the two and almost pleads for a clean break in baptismal practice, but Brunner quite approves of infant baptism on the mission field where the faith of the parents is examined beforehand.¹¹¹ Leenhardt¹¹² too is concerned to plead for the

¹⁰⁶ This seems to be true, despite the assertion of F. C. Tindall (*op. cit.*, p. 8), that such a distinction is now a commonplace in our discussions.

¹⁰⁷ *Op. cit.*, *passim*.

¹⁰⁸ *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 132.

¹⁰⁹ *Le Baptême Chrétien*, pp. 71ff. Cf. "Pédobaptisme catholique et Pédobaptisme réformé," in *Études Théologiques et religieuses*, vol. 25, (1950), pp. 143-206.

¹¹⁰ B. Citron, *New Birth*, pp. 139ff.

¹¹¹ Cf. C. T. Craig, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

¹¹² *Le Baptême Chrétien*, pp. 71ff.

reformation of infant baptism rather than its abolition.

The last generation has also witnessed a movement towards this goal inside the Church of England, where there are three principal attitudes to infant baptism¹¹³: (a) some who would not refuse or delay the baptism whatever the circumstances; (b) others who desire such a reform of baptism as to ensure that it was only administered where there was the likelihood of the child having a Christian upbringing; (c) others again, who feel that the whole question is so much under discussion that it is better for the time being to aim at improvements in practice rather than at any radical reform.

It is really with the second group that we are concerned, and it may be observed that this seems to fall most naturally into line with Article XXVII, on which Bicknell¹¹⁴ comments that it is very doubtful whether it is right to baptize infants indiscriminately. The Second Interim Report of the Joint Committee on Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Communion presented to the Convocations of Canterbury and York¹¹⁵ in 1949 give us a survey of the present situation.

That there are difficulties in the way of a reform of infant baptism no one can deny, though there is a certain feeling of artificiality for some of us when the Reports tell us¹¹⁶ that to refuse baptism to some children would only lead to further difficulties later concerning Christian Marriage and Christian Burial. What is more important is the fact that the real difficulty in such a reformed doctrine would be that of giving a fair judgment, and many parish priests would experience serious difficulties in their attempts at discrimination. The only alternative¹¹⁷ to this seems to be so to reform baptism that it is deferred altogether to the "age of consciousness," and there are a few within the Anglican Communion who would advocate such a measure, but we are informed that even among those who are desirous of reform at all, most would probably not accept such a drastic move.

Thus we are faced with the facts that the present position of baptism in the Church is, according to Brunner, "scandalous,"¹¹⁸ and that it is a matter of concern inside the Church of England. Reform, if it comes at all, is hardly likely to do more than limit baptism to the children of Christian parents, and in that respect

¹¹³ Taylor, *Baptism in the Church*, pp. 34ff; *Baptism Today*, p. 4; F. C. Tindall, *Christian Initiation*, pp. 19-20.

¹¹⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 476.

¹¹⁵ *Baptism Today*, Press and Publications Board of the Church Assembly, 1949.

¹¹⁶ p. 28.

¹¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, pp. 28f.

¹¹⁸ *The Divine-Human Encounter*, p. 132.

the difficulty already mentioned seems to the present writer insuperable. Yet there is not a widespread desire to revert to what is commonly acknowledged to have been the baptism of the New Testament, neither is it likely that the Church as a whole would welcome a call to cast off a rite which has been practised for over 1,500 years.

P. T. Forsyth¹¹⁹ as early as 1917, suggested that both forms of baptism ought to exist in the one Church and a monopoly claimed for neither. The difficulty with such a solution seems to be that if a child's parents decided to baptize him in infancy he is thereby robbed of the privilege of believer's baptism should he later desire it. In other words, believer's baptism would only be a possibility for those whose spiritual welfare had been left uncared for at birth. So we reach an impasse. Add to the difficulty here those dealt with previously concerning baptism and faith, and it seems more and more to the present writer that the only solution is a fervent call to as full and complete adoption of believer's baptism as the Church can produce. If, however, to ask for such is "to cry for the moon," as indeed it appears to be, and if in the interests of reunion a fresh doctrine of baptism is needed so as to cover both forms, then we can but pray God to lead us to the right one. The only way open at present seems to be that infants where one or both parents are Church members would alone be baptized at birth; the rest would await personal decision. But if this practice were not to lead to more difficulties than it solved, then the interpretation of the rite would have to be so simple as to be almost meaningless. Indeed, there are those who maintain already that infant baptism, if a sacrament at all, is a very different one from believer's baptism¹²⁰; such would be even more the case if one doctrine were to embrace both methods. Either it would not be a sacrament at all or it would be something quite different from what we have had in the past.

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(To be Concluded)

¹¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, pp. 214ff.

¹²⁰ Leenhardt, "Pédobaptisme catholique et Pédobaptisme réformé," in *Etudes Théologiques et religieuses*, vol. 25, (1950), pp. 186ff; also *Le Baptême Chrétien*, p. 69; Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 129. Cf. Cullmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 28f.