

Theology and Logic

A LOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE EXEGETICAL METHOD OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND'S INTERIM REPORT ON BAPTISM

MANY winds have blown, from many directions, since Theology was the acknowledged Queen of the *sciences*, the fitting crown and fulfilment of a rigorous philosophical discipline, but few among them have influenced Theology so deeply as the movement which began with the rediscovery of Kierkegaard, and which has either (according to one's point of view) driven a destructive wedge between Theology and all rational philosophy, to the complete confusion of apologetics, or has rescued Theology from the barrenness of an arid rationalism and reasserted revelation. Either way, the relations between Theology and Logic have in recent years become decidedly strained.

It has been pure gain to be reminded that life is not an exercise in logic. Theology has profited deeply by the lesson that reality is always existential, never merely theoretic; that logical and psychological analysis, useful as a transcript of experience, is never its substitute. On the other hand, a morbid love of paradox for its own sake, an uncritical tolerance of the incomprehensible and the illogical under the deceptive guise of "tension," a tacit agreement with the earlier Logical Positivists that Theology belongs to a realm beyond truth and falsehood, the destruction of the foundations laid by Natural Theology for human responsibility, for man's capacity to receive revelation, and for the doctrine of the incarnation, and a revived preoccupation with typological and analogical modes of exegesis are among the less happy consequences of the disparagement of reason in theological method. It had seemed possible to hope that whatever the pitfalls for Dogmatic and Philosophical Theology, at least Biblical Theology would remain free from the vagaries of paradox, fallacy, and "meaningless statement," safe under the firm control of philological, grammatical, literary and historical disciplines. The hope has proved unfounded; disregard of logic has invaded exegesis itself, and the hard-won gains of generations of painstaking scholars who strove to rescue Biblical interpretation from mere subjectivism seem to be again imperilled.

The only satisfactory proof of this is to take a piece of sustained and detailed exegesis and attempt a formal logical analysis of its *method*. An excellent example is provided in the Interim Report of the Church of Scotland's Special Commission on Baptism. With the substance of the argument we are not here concerned, but only with its exegetical method. Since the subject is our Lord's own teaching on how men come to salvation, and the pamphlet is the work of a group of highly qualified and representative scholars, the example is neither trivial nor exceptional; while by confining our analysis to that section of the Report (pages 22-25) which professes to offer "detailed evidence" of the thesis "that little children share in Christ's Baptism" we avoid the suspicion of unfairness in applying strictly logical tests to Theological material. The results are disconcerting.

The first statement consists of two main propositions said to be "in line" one with another :

- a. (i) we have to be baptized as little children and (ii) we can only enter into the kingdom as little children.
- b. The Synoptic Gospels give children a decided place in the kingdom and in the Church.

a. (i) and b. simply restate the point in dispute. Whatever force lies in this first argument arises from the apparent equivalence of a. (i) and a. (ii), plus the fact that a. (ii) sufficiently resembles a saying of Jesus to win our emotional assent to anything said to be its equivalent. But immediately we notice that "as little children" means in a. (i) *when* we are little children, and in a. (ii) *after the manner* of little children, the apparent similarity disappears, and we realise that we have been imposed upon by an ambiguous middle term. b. has been implanted, but certainly not proved.

Next we are told :

- c. The kingdom reverses the usual order of things so that the first shall be last and the last first.
- d. Therefore ("for") children have a unique place in the kingdom.

Again an echo of Jesus wins emotional assent; but d. follows from c. only if "to be last" means "to be a little child" and "to be first" means to have a place in the kingdom. This might conceivably be so, but no proof is offered, and it makes nonsense of c. Statement d. (i.e. b.) remains unsupported.

Now follow five statements :

- e. Matthew records that Jesus said : "Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them unto babes."
- f. Jesus also said, from the same Psalm : "Out of the mouth of babes Thou hast perfected praise."

- g. Whether Jesus had His own childhood in mind is uncertain (with a reference to *Luke* ii. 49).
- h. Conclusion : ("It seems clear that . . ."). The relation of little children to the Father is mediated through the sonship of Christ.
- i. Little children may not know what they are saying but Jesus is Himself their cry to the Father.
- j. In the language of St. Paul, It is through the Spirit that we cry "Abba, Father."

It is impossible to detect by what rule of inference *h.* follows from *e.*, *f.* even with the help of the uncertainty, *g.* One of its terms (mediation through Christ's sonship) appears in neither premise; the other (the relation of little children to the Father) occurs in the premises only if "babes" in *e.* and *f.* refers to "little children." In fact "babes" in *e.* refers to the disciples returning from their mission (and is the antithesis of "wise and prudent"); in *f.* it refers to children old enough to shout Hosanna in the Temple Courts, though by *h.* and *i.* it has come to mean little children who may not know what they are saying. *h.* is thus a glaring *non-sequitur*. The precise function of a stated uncertainty (*g.*) in the presentation of evidence is not clear, but whatever the quotation of *Luke* ii. 49 is intended to convey, it clearly has to do not with Christ's infancy but with an utterance made after His formal admission as a Son of the Law—and is utterly irrelevant to *h.* *i.*, as an unsupported restatement of *h.*, adds nothing to the argument. *j.* is yet another instance of the quotation of an admitted authority to lend illegitimate support to a conclusion not yet established—illegitimate because "the Spirit" in *Galatians* iv. 6 is not identical with "Christ" in *h.*, and "we" does not refer to "babes" but to believers. Finally, even had *h.* been irrefutably established, it would not by any means carry with it the truth of the original thesis for which evidence is being offered.

The next paragraph is particularly involved but its main assertions may be summarised thus :

- k. Jesus said : "Whosoever receives one such little child in My name receives Me."
- l. Rabbis, Zadokites and Essenes used the phrase "in my name" to signify the adoption of a foundling child.
- m. Rabbis, Zadokites and Essenes circumcised and baptised such adopted foundlings and brought them within the Israelite, Zadokite or Essene communities.
- n. Peter used the same phrase on the day of Pentecost of baptism in the name of Christ.
- o. Conclusion : "We are to see here . . ." in the fullest sense reception in Jesus Christ and entry into the kingdom . . . baptismal initiation.

- p.* This is an act in which we are concerned not only with the child but with Christ Himself.

The valid conclusion from *k.*, *l.*, *m.* (plus the assumption that the practice of the Rabbis, Zadokites and Essenes strictly defines the only possible meaning of the phrase "in My name" on Christ's lips) would be that Jesus regards the *adoption*, with circumcision and baptism, of foundling children as a kindness done to Himself, and so a duty binding upon the Christian. But this will hardly do, not only because the implied assumption begs the whole question upon which evidence is being offered, but because neither circumcision, nor the limitation of Infant Baptism to foundling children, is part of the thesis. The conclusion *o.* is therefore helped out by the strictly extraneous and certainly inaccurate *n.*—extraneous because Peter's words were certainly addressed to other than foundling children, and inaccurate because Peter did not use this particular phrase whose meaning is being defined. The use of another phrase by another speaker on another occasion does nothing to establish the meaning of this phrase on this occasion by Jesus, especially when evidence already given (*l.*, *m.*) purports to show that the phrase means *not* Baptism but adoption accompanied by circumcision and Baptism. *k.*, *l.* yield a striking new example of the principle of "Inasmuch . . ." for which all readers will be grateful; apart from this the paragraph proves either far too much or nothing at all.

The conclusion *o.* ("We are to see here"—in the phrase "who-soever receives one such little child in my name"—"in the fullest sense reception in Jesus Christ and entry into the kingdom . . . baptismal initiation") occupies so prominent a place in the rest of the discussion that closer attention must be paid to its validity. The premise *n.* is introduced to suggest by simple juxtaposition that since the phrase "*en* to onomati" is used by Peter at Pentecost in connection with Baptism, then the phrase "*e pi* to onoma" used here by Jesus is also a baptismal phrase. The appeal to analogous usage is a legitimate linguistic argument, but it must be accurate, fair and consistent. "*E pi* to onoma" occurs nine times, in contexts having to do with the coming of false prophets, doing miracles, preaching, speaking and teaching "in the name"—never with Baptism; Peter's phrase, "*en* to onomati" is also used of coming, working, miracles, preaching, giving cold water, exorcism, God's sending the Comforter, giving thanks, having life, asking, praying, and doing all "in the name"—it is by no means usually, or often, a baptismal phrase; "*e is* to onoma" is the more frequent baptismal phrase, and *Matthew* shows Jesus using it in *Matthew* xxviii. 19, but this phrase again is used also of believing, being gathered together, receiving a prophet, or righteous man, and giving water 'in the name.' Vincent Taylor is obviously justified in doubting whether any distinction

between these prepositional phrases can be sustained (*Mark*, 407), but that is not our present business: logically, the appeal to analogous usage is here quite inaccurate and wholly unfair. It is also inconsistent: Jesus Himself uses "receiving" to mean "welcoming" a prophet, or righteous man, the disciples on their mission, and its antithesis is "rejecting" those disciples and their mission—and the appeal to analogous usage for this phrase would definitely *exclude* the meaning "entry into the kingdom . . . baptismal initiation." Finally, if "receive one such little one" means reception into Christ, into the kingdom, and Baptism, then plainly "receiveth Me" *in the same sentence* (and especially in view of *p.*, regarded as an admonitory version of *k.*) must mean receiving Christ into Christ, the kingdom and Baptism! The conclusion *o.* is hatched in a veritable nest of logical fallacies.

The logical process becomes even more obscure when we turn to *Matthew* xviii: "Whoso shall put a stumbling block in the way of one of these little ones that believe in me; it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck. . . ." Here all turns, logically, on the meaning of "little ones who believe." Once again we have innuendo: a theological aside flirts with the idea that the giving of a cup of water which *Mark* couples with this saying *may* have affiliations with Paul's reference to Jews and Gentiles being baptized into one body and being made to drink of one spiritual drink; but the suggestion once implanted is immediately dropped, as it ought to be, and takes no further place in the discussion.

Instead, *Matthew's* phrase about little ones who believe "into" Christ is said to be a difficulty, because *Judaism* does not speak in these terms about children—it being assumed that "little ones who believe" must refer to children, and that Judaist usage is regulative for our Lord. The difficulty is then met by either of two possible interpretations, each of which would justify Infant Baptism. (i) The phrase "believe into" may be equivalent to Baptism, as it is in *Galatians* iii. 24f. "If this is so, then to put a stumbling-block in the way of little children, that is, to hinder their being baptized, is a terrible crime." Which is to say, by the definition now established, "to hinder the little ones who are baptized into me from being baptized is a terrible crime": it is also a logical one of the first order!

But (ii) the phrase may on the other hand refer to actual belief in Jesus, in which case *Matthew* wants us to see that "the rational order is reversed in relation to Jesus Christ," and "take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones" is a warning, for those who find it difficult to comprehend the faith of an infant, that despising an infant's faith is perilous—it is against the heavenly ordering of God. The dilemma is thus presented: these sayings refer either (i) to Infant Baptism, or (ii) to infant belief in Christ, and so to Infant

Believers' Baptism. The fallacy of the false dilemma will deceive no one. Not only is one member of it (i) itself a logical howler, but the alternatives are not exhausted. T. W. Manson has proposed a treatment of these words, "little ones who believe," which is in close accord with Synoptic origins, usage and thought, which denies that "children" are meant at all in Matthew's version (*Sayings of Jesus*, 138). It is not necessary to insist that Manson is right: the mere existence of a third possible interpretation destroys the dilemma and the whole argument fails. We are as far as ever from "evidence" in support of the thesis.

Finally we are directed to *Matthew's* record of the blessing of the children. First come "two important facts" about these passages: (i) The whole context, *Matthew* xvi. 13-xx. 28 is liturgical. A scholar's opinion that this section forms a distinct account of the Church's worship is mentioned only to be rejected once its suggestion has been implanted; and the equivalence of "reception of little children" and "baptism of little children" is asserted—although this is the point to be established—in order to give the whole passage a *baptismal* reference. This assumes that in a supposedly liturgical passage *everything* must have liturgical reference—which a glance over these chapters will show to be absurd. But if anything between xvi. 13 and xx. 28 be admittedly non-liturgical, then the passage in dispute may be non-liturgical also: its liturgical, and baptismal reference must be proved, not assumed as here.

(The passage includes—taking up the cross, what is a man profited, Transfiguration, coming of Elias, the treatment of John Baptist, healing of the lunatic, faith like mustard seed, payment of tribute, cutting off the hand and foot, the lost sheep, forgiveness of injuries, the great commandment, warning against riches, the labourers, the request of Zebedee's children).

(ii) The second "important fact" concerning this passage is that it follows upon the blessing of marriage, thus:

- q. The sayings about children follow closely on the teaching concerning marriage; the blessing of children follows naturally upon the blessing of marriage.
- r. The same procedure is seen in *Ephesians and Colossians*.
- s. Conclusion: ("It is not surprising *therefore* that") the Synoptic account of the blessing of the infants has been taken from very early times to refer to Infant Baptism.

To this type of logic nothing at all would be surprising. *s.* is made to appear as a conclusion from *q.*, *r.* simply by the surreptitious introduction of the word "therefore." Apart from this, and the *possibility* that "children" in *q.* refers to infants, there is not the least connection, logically, between *q.*, *r.* and *s.* All that *r.* adds to *q.*

is the fact that the movement of thought from marriage to children was as "natural" for Paul as for Jesus (or *Matthew*). But even cursory attention to *q.* suggests that the word "blessing" cannot possibly imply Baptism—what is the Baptism of marriage?

These preliminaries done, "three main things" are said about these passages recording the blessing of the children. (*a*) We are told that Professor Cullmann has asserted the baptismal meaning of the passage, and that his interpretation has been widely accepted. No evidence being offered on either point (except that the passage has one word in common with certain baptismal passages), the thesis gains no further support except a certain air of prestige.

(*b*) Another dilemma is offered: two interpretations are mooted, either of which will justify Infant Baptism. (*i*) *Mark* and *Luke* speak of Jesus laying His hands upon the children in the same way that He touched and healed the sick. "If so we may use for our understanding of it the incident of the healing of the little boy at the foot of the Mount of Transfiguration, when the father said . . . 'I believe, help thou my unbelief' . . . and Jesus laying His hand on the boy raised him up." This conjunction of ideas defies logical analysis, but it appears to mean that since the laying of Christ's hand on the lad (he is no longer a child, *Mark* ix. 21) helped the father's faith, the laying of His hands upon infants implies that they have, or can have, faith, and so Baptism. If this is the intended argument, it stands self-refuted, another glaring *non sequitur*. This interpretation leads more logically to the conclusion that the laying of hands upon the sick means Jesus *baptized* each patient as His mode of healing them.

(*ii*) Alternatively, we are told *Matthew* tells of the same incident in terms of the Temple liturgy—they brought forward the children as lambs to the altar; "suffer them to come unto me" means proselytisation, or at least full participation in Christian worship; the blessing corresponds to that at circumcision or the redemption of the first-born, with the laying on of hands and the Aaronic Benediction; and the similarity to earliest accounts of Baptism is so strong as to constrain us to read the incident as intended to speak of Baptism. Here are five wholly unsupported statements whose truth and relevance cannot be tested because the evidence for them is lacking. They are in no sense evidence for the thesis under discussion; they merely show how if that thesis be accepted *Matthew's* account could be understood by one determined to find in it a baptismal implication. This of course is legitimate enough, logically; but no reason is given why the simple, obvious interpretation of the incident cannot be accepted, why these two expositions are the only ones available, or (for that matter) why since *Mark* and *Luke* disagree so widely with *Matthew* on the meaning of the incident, we should accept either.

(c) The third "main thing" to be said about these passages is logically the most curious of all. Five passages (*Matthew* xviii. 3, *Mark* x. 15, *Luke* xix. 17, *John* iii. 3 and *John* iii. 5) are printed in parallel columns, each passage divided into four main clauses, after the manner so familiar in Synoptic study. This once more is prefaced by the innuendo that "a number of scholars" see behind all these verses the same basic incident; this being patently untrue it is at once denied, but the suggestion being implanted we are readier for the more moderate assertion that all five passages say precisely the same thing. "This becomes clear when they are placed in parallel columns." In fact the only things that become clear are that each begins with "Verily" and each ends with "cannot enter—or see—the kingdom." The first three speak of conversion "as" little children but say nothing about Baptism; the last two refer to birth of the Spirit and of water and say nothing about conversion "as" little children. The assertion that all mean the same thing, new birth through Baptism as a little child, is the merest assertion; the typographical trick of printing texts side by side does not in the least establish their identity, or even their theological affiliation, and in this case the "appeal to inspection" singularly fails: the five passages patently do *not* say the same thing. In any case the assertion here made constitutes the very point upon which, once more, evidence was to be led—that the Synoptics support the contention that little children share in Christ's Baptism.

Whatever we may decide about the doctrine here under discussion (or about any doctrine which needs these methods of argument to support it) no conscientious student of the New Testament can feel happy about the prevalence of this type of exegesis—so persistently subjective in its judgments, so careless of the rules of logic and the consistent definition of terms, so ready to depart from the plain meaning of the text in favour of abstruse theologising far over the heads of the unsophisticated readers for whom the New Testament was written, and withal so ready to appeal to methods like innuendo, the insinuation of inferences without committing oneself to them, the simple juxtaposition of texts without proof of their inner relationship, the offering of alternative interpretations "without prejudice" so long as the debating-point is gained—all suggesting that the expositor is determined to find a given meaning whatever the Scripture says. This is no isolated or merely individual judgment: again and again in reviews of new work one comes upon comments which admire the "powerful argumentation," the "brilliant tour de force," the "learning, ingenuity and thoroughness which just fail to convince," testifying to an abundance of technical scholarship that nevertheless does not carry illumination or conviction. This way lies exegetical anarchy, new justification for the old jibe that one can prove anything from the Bible. Unless exegesis:

adheres with rigid loyalty to the strict discipline which seeks only what the writer meant his immediate readers to understand, refusing to force words to the limits of their meaning, and cultivating an alert and tender logical and exegetical conscience, Biblical Theology will drift into the confusion that already besets dogmatics and philosophy, where words mean very much what their users want them to mean, and agreement is precluded by lack of common methods of discussion. Logic, it is true, will not impart *life*, nor keep us in the *way*, but it is the surest intellectual safeguard of the *truth*.

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