

Church Union: a Call to Obedience

THIS is a moment of crisis for the Church in Ceylon. It is called to re-appraisal of its missionary role and the implications of its involvement in the life of the nation. Such an evaluation of the mission of the Church requires a fresh understanding of contemporary history, the sweeping political and social changes, the present ferment of national aspirations and the religious and ideological presuppositions that undergird them. The Ceylon of the pioneer missionaries is no more. Christianity is no longer the religion of a privileged middle-class minority elevated above their fellows by virtue of their identification with the religious faith of the rulers of the land. Neither is the Church the privileged institution with its claim to pioneering work in the field of education and social service, nor is it the haven of those converts uprooted from home and society where they truly belonged, who were saved out of the world to live as strangers and sojourners in their own native land. Contemporary history has witnessed the emergence of a new and dynamic concept of nationhood, freedom and self-determination.

One of the primary concerns of the state in its task of nation building has been to weld together different ethnic and religious groups, and inspire them with a vision of one people and one nation. The divisive forces of race, language and caste are a constant threat to national unity having the potential of erupting into a major crisis and setting the clock back in the nation's onward march to true emancipation and progress. The socialist policy of successive governments has to a large extent bridged the traditional national gulf between the privileged aristocracy and the under-privileged, and Ceylon too has seen the dawn of the era of the common man. The welfare of the common man is bound up with the economic development of the country. The vigorous effort to promote agricultural and industrial expansion will inevitably repeat here the problems of urbanization and the consequences of mechanization which confronted the more developed countries of the West. The state has launched on a very ambitious programme of educational reforms. The state-mission partnership in education has now been replaced by a state-controlled system which provides free education at all levels, the primary, secondary and university. The Church in Ceylon, unfortunately, has been isolated from the main stream of its history for many generations. The Church is no longer outside these rapid and revolutionary changes that are determinative of the shape of things to come. Therefore the Church in Ceylon which is called to be the Church for Ceylon must understand anew the meaning

and message of the Gospel for a country like this, at a time like this.

The negotiations for Church Union in Ceylon are a sign of the Church come of age, compelled by a new missionary imperative and dimension seeking to be the Church for Ceylon, in obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ. Long years of earnest prayer, study and debate marked the necessary and significant process of mutual theological enlightenment and a greater appreciation of denominational doctrines and Church structures. Denominational arrogance and the theologically questionable claims of an exclusive monopoly of God's truth have given way to a gracious attitude of acceptance of the Churches as Churches, and all Christians as brothers in Christ. We are now prepared to grant that other Christians have a rightful claim to the privileges, obligations and responsibilities which we once claimed as our peculiar Christian heritage. In the mission of the Church and its missionary outreach we are now convinced that our calling is not primarily to perpetuate denominational or confessional history but to be a confessing Church building the Kingdom of God in our land. The external pressures of the rapidly changing social and political scene have challenged the Church to discover its true selfhood and the meaning of its involvement in the world. Negotiations for Church Union are one bold response to the inner demand for the Church to be more relevant, meaningful and dynamic in its mission to the world. It is an act of faith and obedience. Negotiations in Ceylon had times of strain and stress, and were sometimes on the verge of breaking point.

We have understood this experience as a necessary phase of God's judging, cleansing, renewing and re-designing of His Church for its mission in a new Lanka. It is in this context that we examine two main issues in the Ceylon Scheme for Church Union, the principles of Union and the doctrine of Baptism.

Principles of Union : Integration or Accommodation

In the preamble to the Ceylon Church Union Scheme the basic principle of Union is explicitly and unequivocally laid down. "The Church of Lanka will be formed by a combination of different elements, each bringing its contribution to the whole, and not by the absorption of any one of any other." It has been the sincere effort of the negotiators to formulate a scheme which would gather into itself the rich and diverse heritage of the Churches as far as they can be integrated into a harmonious whole. Baptists are justified in examining the Scheme from this point of view to ascertain whether the principle of comprehension has been consistently upheld. Is the scheme guilty of a gross violation of any of the fundamental Baptist doctrines and insights? Has the scheme adequately incorporated Baptist distinctives to ensure that the new Church of Lanka is the richer for the Baptist contribution?

A cursory glance at the Ceylon Church Union Scheme may give

the impression that all it has achieved is to make provision for several parallel streams to exist side by side rather than integrating different traditions and practices into one meaningful organic Union. A careful study of the Scheme will convince us that this is not so. It is true that the scheme allows different shades of theological interpretations without ruthlessly demanding conformity to particular forms of theological articulation and definition. A clear illustration of the process of integration is seen, for example in the faith and practice of the service of Holy Communion and also in the matter of Church government, where the Episcopal and the Free Church Congregational patterns are interwoven.

It must be acknowledged that there are other areas where the integration is not sufficiently complete and perfect. The process of complete integration of all the different elements into a new and meaningful identity will continue after Union. The Church must continue to be alive and dynamic both in its theological task, and in the re-shaping of the structures of the Church in response to the changing needs both from within the Church, and from the world outside. All that could be done at the initial stage is to formulate a framework which would leave the door open for such growing together which would eventually lead to greater integration. A successful scheme will foster growing together in fellowship, in worship, and in joint action for mission. Such unity will gradually enable Christians to shed those denominational differences which still cling to them in spite of their resolution to unite.

It is contended however by some critics of Union schemes that there should be greater agreement on the content of faith and the theology of sacraments before proceeding to union. Some have warned that it would be highly dangerous to leave ambiguity in areas of unresolved controversy to become the initial questions of theological debate in the United Church. While appreciating the warning of these observations it is recognized that the United Church will conduct its theological task from the perspective of one Church and not from the pre-Union denominational perspective. It would be almost disastrous for the Church to wait for tidy solutions to all our theological problems before we manifest our oneness with those who confess their faith in One Lord. The Ceylon Scheme and its principle of comprehension have been generally welcome in Ceylon and many other parts of the world as providing a very satisfactory framework within which the people of God—"all in each place"—could be identifiable in the world as one Christian community in their worship, confession and witness.

The Sacrament of Baptism

Most of the Union schemes make provision both for the baptism of infants and the baptism of believers. The doctrine of baptism

and its practice is not a problem where all the negotiating Churches practise infant baptism. In the Ceylon Scheme, the Church of Ceylon (Anglican), the Methodist Church, The Presbytery of Lanka, and the Jaffna Diocese of the Church of South India practise infant baptism. They also baptize adult converts.

It is a practice in some of these Churches to baptize adult converts by immersion. To these Churches therefore their doctrine of baptism presents a problem only so far as it is challenged by the Baptists. The Church Union Scheme attempts to bring the two traditions together by allowing the continuance of both practices in the United Church. The theological difficulty for the Baptists is in the definition of baptism which incorporates in it both infant baptism and believers' baptism. The Ceylon Scheme defines baptism as "a sign and seal of engrafting into Christ and entrance into the covenant of grace. In Him we receive the new birth, the forgiveness of sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Those who are baptized are by this sacrament solemnly admitted into the fellowship of the Church and engaged to be the Lord's." It goes on to state, "The grace of Christ conferred in baptism is appropriated unto salvation by repentance and faith". The Baptists would agree that the latter statement is true of those baptized as infants, but that it is not a true representation of the experience of those baptized as believers. The Baptists contend that, according to their reading of the Scriptures, the grace of Christ working in the heart of an individual leads him to repentance, faith and confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. Baptism, therefore is a sacramental symbolic expression of man's response of faith and obedience to God's gracious redemptive work become effective in the life of the individual.

As the aim of this article is a critical study of the doctrine of baptism in the Ceylon Scheme and not popular denominational polemic it is profitable to review briefly the area of common ground between baptism as understood and practised by a major section of Christendom on the one hand, and by the Baptists on the other. The sacrament of baptism is deeply rooted in God's redemptive work in Christ as borne out by New Testament soteriology. The significance of the baptism of Jesus for the understanding of the meaning of Christian baptism is implied in the New Testament. Whether we accept the popular view that Jesus became aware of His messianic vocation at His baptism or agree with Alan Richardson's view that the only significance was the bestowing of the Holy Spirit on Jesus, His baptism sheds light and meaning on the apostolic teaching and practice. Jesus identified Himself with the eschatology of John's baptism and expressed His solidarity with men waiting for the imminent arrival of the messianic age—the inauguration of the Kingdom of God on earth. In the words of T. W. Manson, "Jesus recognizes in John's efforts to create New Israel the purpose of God and willingly enters into it". Dr. Beasley-Murray, comment-

ing on the significance of the Lord's baptism, observes, "Jesus came to the baptism of John among the penitents of Israel responsive to John's proclamation to begin the messianic task in its fullness as He interpreted it from the writings of the Old Testament". The baptism of Jesus expressed His decisive identification with the Father's plan of redemption for the world and with humanity the object of God's redemptive concern and outreach. Jesus is uniquely and supremely the Son of God who fulfils in Himself the ideal of the Suffering Servant.

It is generally agreed that the sacrament of baptism is the mark of an individual's belonging to the community of the faithful, or being accepted or incorporated into the membership of the Body of Christ. In the baptismal rites of the ancient Church handed down to us, for example, by Hippolytus and Tertullian this element is perfectly clear. The individual renounces the devil and all his works and confesses faith in Jesus Christ the Son of God. After the bishop has anointed him with oil he is admitted into the people of God. Both in infant baptism and believers' baptism the baptized is named a Christian to be identified henceforth in his relation to the Church. The centrality of Christ as the principal actor in the sacrament is accepted. It is also recognized that both in answer to the prayer of the individual and the Church, God continues to bestow His grace and Holy Spirit on the baptized. Moreover, as the baptism of Jesus was a willing acceptance of His vocation and a pledge of His obedience to the Father, so Christian baptism looks forward to a life of service. The new life in Christ is a life of fellowship with Christ in its vertical dimension and a life of creative participation in the mission of the Church. In the words of "One Lord, one baptism", we are agreed that "To be baptized is to live in and for Christ, to live in and for His Church and to live in and for the world". "What happens in baptism is that my little life is taken up into God's plan of salvation, the mighty movement of salvation—history, whereby it is carried along towards its eschatological fulfilment at the parousia of Christ."

In the Ceylon Scheme of Church Union, as in many other schemes, this explanation of baptism is taken for granted as common ground, and on this presupposition the two baptisms are allowed as alternative practices. It is one of the major criticisms of the Ceylon scheme that the theology of believers' baptism which is borne out explicitly by New Testament exegesis and apostolic teaching and practice is identified with the theology of Infant Baptism which has no New Testament authority or definite apostolic precedent. If the New Testament doctrine of baptism is a criterion of evaluation and explanation of Christian baptism how could the application of the rite to infants bear the same significance as when the subject is a responsible and responsive convert? What exactly is the theological interpretation of the words of the Ceylon Scheme,

"In Him we receive the new birth, the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit" in relation to infant baptism? The critics of infant baptism maintain that according to the New Testament the baptized begins a new life, with a new focus in a new environment, with a new status and with a clearly defined goal of Christian stewardship and discipleship. This transition, fundamental and decisive for the individual believer ceases to be meaningful in the case of a helpless infant. The New Testament meanings associated with baptism—washing or cleansing, putting away the old man, forgiveness, new birth, gift of the Spirit, putting on Christ, dying and rising with Christ, are wholly inapplicable to a description of infant baptism. Professor Norman Snaith maintains that "by the transference of the rite to infancy it ceased to be believers' baptism, and that infant sprinkling can scarcely have the same significance as believers' baptism". Pierre Marcel of the French Reformed Church is quoted fairly extensively by Dr. Beasley-Murray in his *Baptism in the New Testament*, and by A. L. Haddon in his article in the *Ecumenical Review* on "The two Baptisms and Church Union". Marcel affirms, "At the present moment the cause of paedobaptism is theologically lost and its advocates deprived of theological arguments attempt to find a precarious refuge in facts and notions which cannot afford the least bit of genuine justification. . . ."

The critics of the Ceylon Scheme argue that it makes provision for two baptisms. They question the justification of treating baptism as one when there are two very different practices, each emphasizing and witnessing to different theological insights respectively. Baptist theologians, by and large, hold the view that by no theological manipulation can the full theological content of the doctrine of believers' baptism be equated with arguments in favour of infant baptism. The arguments based on the prevenient grace of God, the faith of god-parents, the believing and repenting Church, circumcision and baptism, and the objectivity of the rite are not sufficiently convincing. This position is further strengthened by the confession of the incompleteness of infant baptism. Schleiermacher, for example wrote "Infant Baptism is a complete baptism only when the profession of faith which comes after further instruction is regarded as the act which consummated it". The Interim Report of the Church of Scotland observes, "Our infant baptism discloses its effectual reality in the confession of faith and in Holy Communion. In baptism the child is planted in Christ but this 'in Christ' comes with full reality when in Holy Communion Christ comes to abide in the heart of the child." We have further evidence of this view from eminent Anglo-Catholic theologians like Dom Gregory Dix who says "Christian initiation in the New Testament is described as conceived of solely in terms of a conscious adherence and response to the Gospel". He is emphatic in his contention that infant baptism should not be regarded as normal but "as an abnormality

wholly incomplete by itself and absolutely needing completion by the gift of the Spirit and the conscious response of faith". This raises the more difficult problem of how we can speak theologically of an incomplete sacrament.

The definition of baptism in the Ceylon Scheme does not in itself suggest any incompleteness but emphasizes the decisiveness and the once for all character of the sacrament. It is not an over-statement to suggest that sufficient agreement has now been reached to relieve this discussion of exclusiveness. Infant baptism may not conform to the New Testament norm as understood by Baptists, but the greater part of Christendom observes it as the sacrament of baptism which proclaims in word and deed the redemptive work of God in Christ.

Baptism and Confirmation

Confirmation is a necessary corollary to infant baptism. The Ceylon Scheme states, "A person who has received sponsored baptism shall be admitted to communicant membership of the Church in a service of Confirmation, such service to provide for a candidate to accept and ratify the vows made on his behalf when he was baptized. This would include confession to God by the candidate of his sin, witness before the congregation by the candidate of his belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and the prayer of the bishop for the gift of the Holy Spirit." Thus it is seen that sponsored baptism is made dependent on and is derived from this fuller service of initiation. Infant baptism and confirmation taken together as one sacrament conform to the New Testament picture of the subjective and objective character of baptism. Confirmation is not a dominical sacrament but in the tradition of many churches it has come to be vested with sacramental status. Theologically speaking confirmation is much more meaningful to the individual as it is vitally related to a spiritual experience of God in Christ and His saving work becoming a reality to him. Professor Lampe observes in this connection, "For the completion of the sacrament there is needed the full personal response of whole-hearted self committal to Christ. On the principle that sacraments are efficacious because in them personal faith responds to personal grace, the administration of Infant Baptism without subsequent Confirmation is, as a matter of regular Church order, not merely anomalous but indefensible." This is brought out clearly in the proposed Australian basis of Union where it says, "In Confirmation the believer repeats the promises of Baptism as a confession that through the gifts of Baptism Christ has brought forth in the Believer the living response of faith".

It is the contention of those who practise believers' baptism that confirmation is almost a negative judgment on the validity and

efficacy of infant baptism, because without the service of confirmation it loses all its significance. The completeness of believers' baptism on the other hand which incorporates all the essential features of confirmation makes it a redundant practice. For a baptized believer to submit to a service of confirmation is to accept by implication some incompleteness in his baptism. The argument against re-baptism that it invalidates and nullifies infant baptism can equally well be applied to Confirmation in the case of those who practise believers' baptism. Another argument against confirmation is the traditional view that its validity and efficacy rest on the bishop who officiates. Several Protestant traditions do not conform to the view that episcopacy is the sole channel of grace. The Ceylon and North India schemes have resolved this difficulty by recognizing the right of a presbyter to conduct the service of confirmation, the North India Scheme being much more definite than the Ceylon Scheme at this point. In the Ceylon Scheme, "The bishop however may authorize a presbyter for a particular occasion to perform in his stead the rite of the laying on of hands in the Service of Confirmation". The North India Scheme says, "The form of admission into communicant membership shall be through Confirmation by a Bishop or through some such service conducted by a Bishop or Presbyter".

Towards a Solution of the Problem

The two forms of baptism are interrelated to two conceptions of the Church, and according to these two traditions baptism is put at two different points in the ordering of the life of the Church. If it can be maintained that a particular form and doctrine of baptism is necessitated by a particular doctrine of the Church, and that the main difference is the point at which it is administered, the two forms will not seem mutually exclusive. The logic of this argument would demand that one baptism takes on two different forms depending at what point in the life of the individual it is administered. This is the assumption of many of the Church Union schemes.

The Ceylon Scheme has attempted to solve this deadlock and meet the problems raised above by treating baptism and confirmation as different points in the total process of Christian initiation. Those baptized as infants become the solemn responsibility of the church for their Christian nurture. They grow in the environment of faith, worship and instruction until they are able to accept responsibility for the vows taken on their behalf. Their initiation is completed at a service of confirmation and they are welcomed to the fellowship of the faithful as communicant members. Children dedicated in infancy are the responsibility of the Church for their spiritual nourishment and growth until they make their profession of

faith in the waters of baptism. As they have in baptism fulfilled the requirements of confirmation they are welcomed into the membership of the Church by the laying on of hands by the bishop with a prayer for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Baptism looks forward to Christian discipleship. Even those who are baptized as believers look forward to their rightful place within the Church as responsible members. They grow into Christian maturity within the fellowship of the Church and are trained and equipped for their responsibility in society. In the case of those baptized in infancy the process will be longer, but at a certain point both categories begin their Christian life following and serving their Master. Thus the Ceylon Scheme has the virtue of avoiding a negative judgment on either form of baptism and finding a proper place for them in the total scheme of salvation and in the life and mission of the Church. True to its principle of comprehension, the two traditions are brought together with the hope and prayer that Christians who confess "One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism" may manifest their oneness in Christ by their visible unity.

In the Church of Lanka, Christians will experience a new freedom in the matter of baptism as no one particular form of baptism will be made obligatory, the parents being free to decide whether they wish their children to be dedicated or baptized. Those who are constrained by an inner conviction that believers' baptism is more in accordance with the teaching of the New Testament and more appropriate to a Church in a missionary situation will have the freedom to bring their children to a service of dedication. As the Church comes within the influence and impact of the new thinking of the World Church on baptism the United Church will find itself free of the weight of tradition to question fearlessly the doctrines and Church structures that were taken for granted through the history of different denominations. The Church will be led to question the justification for perpetuating two forms of baptism while confessing faith in one baptism for the remission of sin. As long as there is a choice between two forms the possibility of the Christians discussing their relative merits cannot be ruled out. It would be a tragedy to create within the Church a theological class distinction! It will also be a difficult undertaking for any bishop or presbyter to give a convincing theological reason for refusing both forms of baptism to a person who becomes convinced of the truth of believers' baptism. If baptism is unrepeatable in the United Church such people will have no alternative but to seek fellowship with those Christian sects who practise believers' baptism. The compromise formula of allowing both forms of baptism, inevitable as it is, to bring the two traditions together, has also within it the seed of disruption. Such a responsible risk will stimulate further thinking on this problem.

The challenge of the moment is to a common commitment to recover a fuller grasp on the Church's faith and listen together to

what God has said and is saying to His Church. As theological truth is inherently bound with the historical and social conditions of human existence, not only those of the first century but of the present time, we must be open to the unfolding of truth by the interaction of faith and circumstances. Negotiating Churches must feel the constraint of the Holy Spirit urging the Churches to discern the meaning and the message of the sacraments for each generation and their peculiar historical circumstances. It would be a retrograde step to postpone indefinitely the movement towards Union until all theological problems are resolved. Christ demands obedience each day and in each situation. The whole project of the pioneer Baptist missionary William Carey was condemned by many of his countrymen as an irrational, risky and obstinate venture that would achieve nothing for the extension of the Kingdom of God. But William Carey was under divine compulsion, and nothing could stop him obeying his Lord and Master however hazardous and unpredictable the path of obedience might have been. The Baptist Church in the East is the fruit of his daring obedience and passionate commitment to the proclamation of the Gospel. As the Church today brings to her Lord the same obedience and courageous faith Christ will accomplish His great purpose for our people and our country.

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Particular Baptist Organisation, 1640-1660. Dr. B. R. White has contributed an article on this subject to the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. XVII, No. 2, October, 1966. It follows up Dr. G. F. Nuttall's study of the Baptist Western Association 1653-58 in the same journal (Vol. XI, 1960) and Dr. White is able to draw upon the records, either in MS or in print, of five associations, the Western, Berkshire, Wales, Midland, Ireland. He finds that "London theology and London leadership" played a significant part and that the "association" or "general meeting" of "messengers" was the characteristic unit of organisation. The associations kept in close touch with each other and they were the fruit of, and themselves helped to further, a nation-wide extension programme which owed much to the efforts of a few dedicated men.