

community of faith, as it is further applied in the later parts of the Old Testament itself, as it is used in the New Testament with Jesus Christ as the key to its understanding, and in subsequent Christian exposition and use, the critical and historical studies are barren and lifeless, condemning the Old Testament to aridity and irrelevance in the eyes of large sections of the membership of our Churches. Such an approach has been most powerfully employed in the quite epoch-making commentary on Exodus by Brevard S. Childs of Yale (Old Testament Library Series, 1974) where each section is not only treated to literary and form criticism of the standard type, but treated in its Old Testament context, its use in the New Testament and in the history of Christian exegesis since. This method has been taken further, in his new introduction to the Old Testament, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979). This approach has also characterised a most interesting new treatment of the subject of Old Testament theology by R. E. Clements, in a book of that name, published in 1978. Insofar as the present writer may himself venture to turn prophet, he would say that this field of enquiry offers one of the most hopeful ways forward in the Old Testament studies of the future.

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Baptism in Context: Further Reflections on Louisville 1979

THE LAST issue of the *Quarterly* included the official report of the consultation on baptism held at Louisville in 1979 between representatives of the Baptist World Alliance and of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.¹ It also contained an introduction to the consultation by Dr. Morris West and his comments on it, written from the background of many years' involvement in Faith and Order discussions.²

I have been asked to add my comments as someone who was also present at Louisville but there very much as a new boy to Faith and Order at the world level. I was fortunate to have been invited there to feed into the discussions the experience of those Local Ecumenical Projects in England where both forms of baptism are practised within one local congregation. My major concern therefore is with the context of baptism in both church and society and I was glad to be included in the small group at Louisville which discussed "Contextuality". My comments in this article are all on this aspect and I note that Morris West remarked "It may be that the section of the

report on contextuality will be shown to be the most significant of all".³

This section opens with the words: "each form of baptismal practice, theology and terminology is determined by its particular history, socio-cultural context and missionary concern".⁴ Each of these points can be illustrated from people I met at the consultation. For me it was my first contact with the Orthodox tradition and I shall always remember their pertinacity in stressing their observance of believer's baptism—the local Orthodox priest from Louisville claimed from the experience of his own children that they showed faith from the moment of their baptism as babies. Equally strange to a British Baptist was the practice of the Southern Baptist Convention in the United States of baptizing children at the age of 8 or 9; we were told that in Texas it can be as early as 5 or 6. Various factors have contributed to the lowering of the average age for baptism—the social pressures facing the majority Protestant church, the nurture provided by the all-age Sunday School from the cradle to the grave, the evangelistic appeal in every service and the desire for the whole family to share in communion from as early a stage as possible. Another example of the missionary concern of Baptists influencing their practice, where they are one of the strongest denominations, came from Jamaica. In the church at Kingston there are two orders of service for the blessing of infants. The one for parents who are church members stresses the responsibility of Christian nurture within the fellowship of the church. The other is for parents who have not made any Christian commitment, and in this the emphasis is on the promises of God.

I believe this stress on context is of value to us in understanding the debate on baptism in our *English* situation. I use that adjective deliberately, not only because my own ministerial experience, both denominational and ecumenical, has been confined to England, but also because the historical, cultural and ecumenical context is quite different for Baptists in Scotland, Ireland and Wales.

It so happened that three weeks before Louisville the Division of Ecumenical Affairs of the British Council of Churches organised a day conference on "Christian Initiation" at Damascus House, Mill Hill. This was done in response to three requests: from the Consultative Committee for Local Ecumenical Projects (L.E.P.s) in England for guidance on several issues concerning Christian initiation which had arisen in L.E.P.s; from the Council of the Baptist Union in their definitive response to the Ten Propositions of the Churches' Unity Commission for "a continued grappling with the real theological divergences that remain" over baptism and church membership;⁵ and from the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches inviting churches in a certain region to discuss together their response to the W.C.C. document "One Baptism, One Eucharist and a Mutually Recognised Ministry".

This conference reported that there are four factors which affect baptismal practice.⁶ The first is theology, and the same kind of agree-

ment on the meaning of baptism was expressed as was later to be shown at Louisville. The second is law, and mention was made both of the Canon Law of the Church of England and of Baptist Trust Deeds which say for any local congregation whether they should practise closed or open membership. The third is pastoral concern, and much of the work of this day conference was done in small groups discussing such topics as the most relevant rite for parents in our society who want to give thanks for the birth of a baby; the continuing nurture of those children within the fellowship of the church and the right point at which they should make a commitment of their own and be admitted to communion; the situation of those young people who pass through a definite conversion experience and wish to express that in believer's baptism whether or not they have been baptized as infants; and the position of those of any age who have drifted away from the church but who on their return to Christian faith want some way of signifying their rededication. Finally there is the social context. Dr. David Thompson of the Churches of Christ read a paper to the conference on this subject, and asked a number of questions such as this: "In an age which has seen a new degree of geographical mobility, how do we keep alive as a real option the idea of the church as a nurturing community for those baptized either as infants or as adults? In what sense is the local church a community today? How can we avoid the retreat into privatised religious experience?"⁷

Reflection on these two consultations on baptism, at Damascus House and at Louisville, has made me realise that the English context for the baptismal dialogue is unique in several ways. In the first place probably a majority of our Baptist churches are open membership, they do not require believer's baptism as a condition of membership. It is difficult to ascertain the exact proportion. The questionnaire sent out by the Baptist Union in 1976 concerning the Ten Propositions contained a question on this, and a clear majority of those churches which replied claimed to practise open membership. In addition many others, whilst legally still closed membership, seek to welcome other Christians to the privileges and responsibilities of membership as much as they possibly can. An open membership congregation is still a rare occurrence amongst Baptists in most other parts of the world.

Secondly there are between fifty and sixty local congregations which are in membership of both the Baptist Union and of at least one other denomination. Around twenty of these are Union Churches founded before the Sharing of Church Buildings Act of 1969, and which from their beginnings have been members of both the Baptist and Congregational Unions. The rest are congregations sharing a building under the 1969 Act. The T.A.P. (Teams and Projects) Register, published in September 1979 by the Consultative Committee for Local Ecumenical Projects in England,⁸ shows that in twenty-two cases Baptists share with Anglicans and others (in two of these with Roman Catholics), in eight cases simply with the United Reformed Church, in two with the Methodists, in one with the Congregational

Federation and in five with Methodists and the United Reformed Church. The majority of these shared buildings are also Local Ecumenical Projects under the care of a Sponsoring Body on which there are official representatives of each denomination involved. This body has the responsibility for discussing and deciding upon issues which may arise in the project. In all these joint congregations both forms of baptism are practised, and the issues which arise from this are being faced by the local congregation, in most cases with the help of a Sponsoring Body. One of these issues is of course "rebaptism", where someone baptized as an infant requests baptism as a believer. In at least four places (Central Churches, Swindon; Beaumont Leys, Leicester; Whaddon Way, Bletchley; Mosborough, Sheffield) guidelines have been written to help the local congregation to face this particular issue with pastoral concern as the overriding factor. Although there are some congregations in the United States where both forms of baptism exist side by side, these do not appear to have raised issues on baptism for the parent denominations to face, as sharply as Local Ecumenical Projects in England have done. Morris West in his comments on Louisville remarked that the issue of "rebaptism" had been noted but not seriously discussed.⁹

The third element in the specifically English context of the baptismal debate is the challenge offered by the Ten Propositions to the denominations in England to recognise each other's churches, members and ministers by entering into some form of covenant. The Baptist Union Council in their reply to the Churches' Unity Commission stated, on the basis of responses from local Baptist churches, that they could not recommend entering into such a covenant whilst certain basic questions remained unresolved, but went on to say "we believe that the model of diversity in unity adopted by the Commission constitutes the most promising avenue of advance offered in this generation".¹⁰ If the denominations which have formed the Churches' Council for Covenanting do reach agreement on the terms of such a covenant, this will renew the challenge to Baptists to reconsider our attitude to those denominations which practise infant baptism and to define more closely what we mean by "diversity in unity". It was a pity that there was no-one at Louisville from North India who could have illustrated from the experience of the United Church there how this diversity in unity is working out in the sphere of baptism. Louisville did not get very far in facing this particular question. The British Council of Churches Assembly in November 1979 discussed the report of the Damascus House conference and posed a sharp question to its member churches—it "asks the Churches to consider how far the two classic patterns of Christian initiation . . . can be seen as acceptable alternatives". In our English context we cannot evade this question.

A further factor in the British scene (the wider adjective is appropriate here) is the influence of the charismatic movement. What is the relationship of water baptism to baptism in the Spirit? This is not touched on at all in the report of Louisville and I do not recall the

subject coming up in discussion. I do not know whether Baptists in other parts of the world have been influenced as much as British Baptists have by the charismatic movement. James Dunn has given one answer to this question in his book *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*:

“We shall see that while the Pentecostal’s belief in the dynamic and experiential nature of Spirit-baptism is well founded, his separation of it from conversion-initiation is wholly unjustified; and that, conversely, while water-baptism is an important element in the complex of conversion-initiation, it is neither to be equated or confused with Spirit-baptism nor to be given the most prominent part in that complex event. The high point in conversion-initiation is the gift of the Spirit, and the beginning of the Christian life is to be reckoned from the experience of Spirit-baptism.”¹¹

For me therefore the most valuable lesson from Louisville was its stress on contextuality, because that has helped me to see the particular elements in our English context which we have to face in our teaching on, and practice of, baptism.

NOTES

¹ *Baptist Quarterly* Vol. 28 (January 1980), pp. 232-239.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 225-232.

³ *Ibid.*, p.231.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 237.

⁵ *Visible Unity in Life and Mission*, Baptist Union, 1977, p. 3.

⁶ *Christian Initiation*, B.C.C. Department of Ecumenical Affairs duplicated report, March 1979.

⁷ *Baptism: Some Historical and Social Considerations*, B.C.C. Department of Ecumenical Affairs, duplicated paper, March 1979.

⁸ *A Register of Christians working together in Groups, Teams and Projects*, B.C.C., 1979.

⁹ *Baptist Quarterly*, Vol. 28 (January 1980), p. 230.

¹⁰ *Visible Unity in Life and Mission*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, London, 1970, p. 4.

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